The Gate through the Mountain

HUGH PENDEXTER

THE GATE THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN

The Gate Through the Mountain

By HUGH PENDEXTER

AUTHOR *of*

"Bird of Freedom," "Harry Idaho," "Old Misery," "Pay Gravel," "The Red Road," "The Wife-Ship Woman," etc.

A. L. BURT COMPANY
Publishers New York

Published by arrangement with The Bobbs-Merrill Company

Printed in U. S. A.

COPYRIGHT, 1929
BY HUGH PENDEXTER

Printed in the United States of America

To

My Friend

Agnes Jeannette Beal

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	HOLD-UPS	11
II	MARY JUNE	37
III	THE DEAD MAN'S MEDICINE	58
IV	GENTLEMAN RALPH PLAYS A CARD	94
V	UNCLE DICK TAKES THE TRAIL	131
VI	SATANTA PLAYS THE BUGLE	159
VII	AT THE HAPPY FORTUNE	195
VIII	IN THE PATH OF TRAGEDY	235
IX	THE MEDICINE OF THE ARAPAHOES	261
X	THE RIVER OF LOST SOULS	290

THE GATE THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN

THE GATE THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN

CHAPTER I

HOLD-UPS

SEVEN thousand feet above sea-level and within two miles of the top of the ridge which almost chokes Raton Pass, stood the stout adobe house of Richens Lacy Wooton. In the pioneer annals of the West, Wooton was proclaimed to be second only to Kit Carson as a mountain man. Had one accosted him by his given name, Wooton probably would have hesitated before replying, but when called "Uncle Dick," his genial smile was immediate. Wherever border men penetrated, Uncle Dick Wooton was a name to swear by and a symbol of stanchness of spirit. Richens Lacy was too much of a mouthful for the hard-headed mountain men. "Dick" came pleasantly, compact and agreeable. The preface of "Uncle" came naturally after the mountaineer had accumulated years of experiences and was accepted as an oracle on all that pertained to the plains, the Indians and the Rockies.

A prominent trait in Uncle Dick was his loyalty to the past, his ability to find rugged virtues in, and an inclination to gloss over, the evils of the dead years. This characteristic was exemplified in his high-perched adobe house, built after the style of an old-time southern plantation residence and a constant reminder to the owner that he was Virginia born.

The house stood on the toll-road Uncle Dick had built through the pass when the migration of settlers, gold-seekers and adventurers demanded a more direct route for wagons to southeast Colorado and northeast New Mexico than was afforded by the old Santa Fé Trail. The construction of this road revealed two striking qualities in the builder: a stubborn courage that persevered to the end, and a thrifty shrewdness that would not allow the glamour of romantic yesterdays to blur his vision in providing for the morrow. From his lofty home the mountain man could look down on the valley of El Rio de las Animas Perditas—The River of Lost Souls—a name which was later shortened to Le Purgatoire by French trappers invading the country in defiance to Spain, and known as the Picketwire by American bull-whackers who demanded a practical nomenclature. To the north rose the Spanish Peaks with their virginal snows. Spanish sentiment early christened them Las Dos Hermanas—The Two Sisters. The Ute Indians approximated this with their Wahtoya—The Twins. But with a directness that ignored any suggestion of the fanciful or frilled, the first Americans styled them the Spanish Peaks and died gallantly at their feet to prove their right to

occupy that country. What stories these Peaks could tell of massacre and heroism!

Far in the north, hung high in the abysmal blue of the summer sky, was the white dome of Pike's Peak. On all sides, practically, the vision was blocked by horizons of serrated tops, all standing watch over man's puny miracle now working itself out along the Arkansas River Road from Leavenworth to Santa Fé.

Surrounded by these ancient landmarks Uncle Dick had played his part in the contest between red and white, commencing when, as a youth, he had joined a wagon train belonging to the Bents and Colonel St. Vrain. Now he had withdrawn high above the old battle-fields to watch daily the passing of the old and the coming of the new. The old order was dying hard and with many a tragic protest, during this summer of 1867.

Somewhere up the old trail was the punitive expedition of General Hancock, or Old-Man-of-the-Thunder, as the Kiowas called him because of the Thunder-Birds he wore on his shoulders. Dohasan, greatest of all Kiowa chiefs, had been dead a year. The Little Arkansas Treaty, signed by Apache, Comanche and Kiowa two years back, where Wichita now stands, was largely in the discard. The sacking of Julesburg by Sioux and Cheyennes within rifle-shot of Fort Sedgwick also had happened two years before.

Conditional causes, however, stretch back indefinitely, like one's ancestors, and to follow them is to hunt for the oldest yesterday. Broadly put, the buffalo long since had weaned the plains tribes from agricul-

tural pursuits, and the coming of the horse had extended the warrior's roamings and multiplied tribal wars. The trader had poured his rum upon the fires; Santa Fé traders had brought smallpox to take its awful toll; the discovery of gold at Pike's Peak in 1858, in Idaho in 1861 and later in Montana, had hurled a terrific amount of adventurous travel across the plains.

California gold-hunters had had three choices of routes: around the Horn, across the Isthmus, or across the plains; but the discovery that made Colorado the most densely populated section in the Indian country left no breadth of choice, and in 1859 a hundred and fifty thousand gold-seekers and traders swarmed up the Platte, the Arkansas and the Smoky Hill Rivers.

Less than a third of these remained, while the hundred-thousand-odd trooped back, frightening game and enraging the Indians.

Now approached the hour for the final curtain on the ruthless and the lawless. Once the toll-road was completed, the Overland Stage Company promptly used it as a station, and through the gate in the mountains passed along the lumbering vehicles, freight-wagons and soldiers, Mexicans and Indians.

For thirty years Uncle Dick's shrewd eyes had observed the changes taking place on the plains and in the mountains. Old-timers were still left to tell of their coups against the red men and their defiance of the elements, but these old times were about to vanish for ever, marking the exit of that wonderful genus, the mountain man.

With wonderful perspicacity Uncle Dick had watched the plains tribes exchange an empire for reservations. Less than a decade before this summer day in 1867, it had been possible to palm off a new spread-eagle cent on the unsophisticated savages for a two-and-a-half-dollar gold-piece. Now the Indians, in looting a stage, were knowing enough to save even the paper money. With this education came a full awakening to their peril. Old-Man-of-the-Thunder needs must keep his eyes open. One called Custer was gallantly riding toward a tragic death nine years away.

The actors in this terrific drama of remaking a land were not limited to gold-hunters, traders and the Indians. Grim romance, with its ghastly retribution, was afforded by the exploits of that pest, the road-agent. Ever since mines in New Mexico had passed under American control and efficiency, the banditti reaped rich harvests from the stage-coaches and, in keeping with the law of compensation, paid high prices.

It had rained this June day and now a gorgeous rainbow was poised between the saw-tooth peaks of two horizons. The rare dry air gave the magnificent arch a grandeur undreamed of by those shut in along misty coasts. Uncle Dick was lost in marveling at the wondrous phenomenon when the west-bound coach toiled up the slope and called him from his contemplation to raise the gate.

The coaches, the soldiers and the American freighters gave him no trouble. He never waited to

discuss terms with the Indians, although they seemed to concede his right to control the road he had built and seldom failed to halt and ask permission to pass. The Mexicans, however, were a perpetual source of annoyance. They denied any man's right to make them pay for traveling through the mountains, and, when they approached, Uncle Dick saw to it that his weapons were handy.

The stage-coaches were ever welcome. They brought new faces as well as ready toll and patronage for the station eating-room. They brought newspapers and intimate news of the world below.

With a hospitable flourish of the hand Uncle Dick made haste to raise the gate. As the coach rolled through Uncle Dick inquired:

"Where's your guards?"

"They turned back to run the east-bound over the long division," growled Turkey Bill, the lanky driver. Then he regretfully added: "Have to owe ye, Uncle Dick. We was cleaned out near the foot of the pass—took everything but our hides."

"Who held you up? Chuckle-Luck?"

"Him an' Boy Charlie."

"Dern that Chuckle-Luck! He had supper here a week ago. Next time he comes I'll make him shell out the toll for this trip."

"You'd better shoot him dead!" wrathfully cried a passenger, climbing from the coach.

"There's no law against passengers doing that same thing," gravely informed Uncle Dick. "If the Overland people want to swear me in and give me

some warrants, I'll serve them warrants on the end of a gun. Just now I'm running a station and toll-house. Chuckle-Luck pays real liberal. Trot inside, mister, and have a snack of venison and trout."

This invitation not only sent the complainant running to the eating-room, but brought three other passengers, all males, piling out. Detaining Turkey Bill, who was keen to meet real victuals, Uncle Dick remarked:

"Thought Boy Charlie was operating on t'other side near the Vermejo."

"He's up on th' Purgatory now with a gang that's workin' both sides of the Pass," briefly retorted Turkey Bill. Then, finding the hand on his arm compelling, he sighed and added, "Joe Peace was tellin' me that a Santa Fé trader told him as how a new cuss is up here to put road-agentin' on a businesslike footin'."

"Shoo! You don't say? But the very fact a man turns road-agent works against his submitting to any authority. Reckon it's a case of Chuckle-Luck and Boy Charlie running in double harness. They may have a few hands with them to-day, but the same chaps will be working independent to-morrow."

"I dunno how much there is in the talk, but I spotted Boy Charlie even if he did wear a hanker over his face. Wind blew his hair back so's I seen the notch in the top of his ear where he was shot by a tenderfoot last season. Joe Peace seems to believe th' yarn 'bout a reg'lar gang. He reckons they'll run out any fellers workin' alone—either that or make 'em come into the gang."

"How many was in the gang?"

"More'n a dozen at the least. They worked it just below the Devil's Elbow. I seen eight an' there was some more back in the brush. Chuckle-Luck covered me an' Boy Charlie got the 'spress-box."

"Hard luck! Go in and feed. You're welcome as religion," said Uncle Dick. "Tell the company's agent how much you owe in toll. Surprising that they should clean you to the hide. It ain't like Chuckle-Luck nor Boy Charlie to bother with small pickings. Never knew of them leaving a man without the price of a bed and a meal of victuals."

"Took every blamed dollar—every piece of jewelry—clean sweep," bitterly assured Turkey Bill.

"Shoo! Ain't that downright stingy? Not a bit of a gentleman's game. Well, go inside and eat. Thank the Lord, no road-agent can steal a man's appetite."

Turkey Bill, abnormally tall and thin, possessed a slender brick-red neck and protruding Adam's apple that may have been responsible for his nickname. He was quick to take advantage of Uncle Dick's invitation and bolted into the station. Disdaining to eat with the passengers, whom he considered with undisguised contempt, he strode back and forth by the table, reaching over the guests' shoulders and appropriating any dish that appealed to his voracious palate. As he paced the floor and bolted his food he kept up a monologue of curses against all road-agents and particularly against those who were such poor sportsmen as to deprive a man of his last dollar.

"Live an' let live is what I say," he proclaimed, securing his mug of coffee and pausing behind a fussy, nervous passenger who claimed Buffalo as his natal city. "Them dawgs took my gold-nugget pin."

"Maybe they wanted it for the woman," tremulously suggested the man from Buffalo.

"The woman!" ejaculated Uncle Dick. "What woman?"

"The woman I saw," timidly explained the Buffalo man.

"He's crazy, Uncle Dick," scornfully informed Turkey Bill, forestalling another passenger who was after a slice of venison. "When they ordered me to drive on he began bleatin' 'bout a woman. Purty place for a woman—down there under th' Devil's Elbow!"

Then, addressing the Buffalo man, and speaking slowly as one might essay to impress a simple truth upon a dull-witted child, he said, "Ye didn't see no woman; *sabe?*"

But the hot food had aroused the passenger's latent manhood, and he stubbornly persisted:

"I saw a woman—a young woman. She was on a horse up on that shelf of rock. She was looking down and watching the whole affair."

"Ye didn't see no woman," thundered the driver, shifting his position to bore his stern gaze into the passenger's fidgety orbs.

"I saw her, too," faintly declared the passenger who had been robbed of the venison. "This is a barbarous country—a woman mixed up with robbers!"

"Wal, I'll be damned!" gasped Turkey Bill, staring helplessly at Uncle Dick. "This little runt never yipped afore that he seen any woman."

"You could have seen her, too, if you'd dared to remove your gaze from the brute standing at the head of the mules," said the Buffalo man, his spirits rising as he unexpectedly found his tale corroborated. "The woman was there, no doubt about it."

"Maybe a settler's girl," offered a third passenger.

Uncle Dick shook his head and fingered his straggling gray locks.

"No settlers along this division," he explained, "not even a lone man nearer than Baptiste's trading shack on Muddy Crick. Maybe it was an Injun woman. I have Arapaho women working about this station. They come and go kind of promiscu's like."

"No," firmly denied the first speaker, "she wasn't so far away but what I could see she was a white woman and dressed like a white woman. She sat there on her horse as still as a picture until they told us to git back into the coach. Then her horse wheeled back from the edge of the rock and she disappeared."

"Mebbe she's the new organizer that Joe Peace was talkin' 'bout," observed Turkey Bill, a sneer in his voice, but an expression of startled speculation in his moody eyes.

"Whoever she is, she's new to this region," Uncle Dick firmly replied. "Women aren't so plenty that we can't place all of them. Why didn't you whip up and ride through them?" this last to the driver.

Turkey Bill grunted in disgust.

"I'm hired to fetch the coach an' fool passengers through," he reminded. "If the company wants their 'spress-box fetched through an' their passengers fetched through without bein' cleaned out it's for th' company to furnish guards. We started out with four an' then had them took away to shoo Injuns clear of the last east-bound. Injuns! Huh! I'd drive through a whole tribe."

Yielding the palm as Indian fighter only to his old friend Carson, Uncle Dick noted the long Colt's revolver strapped to the driver's thigh, a smaller Colt in his belt and then glanced through the window at the repeating rifle showing in the boot and gently remarked:

"Of course you're hired to drive, not fight, but you seem to be packing considerable hardware. I understand now. They're to be used only against Injuns."

"They'll be used against road-agents when I'm paid to use 'em, Mr. Wooton," growled Turkey Bill.

"Of course they will, Bill," soothed Uncle Dick. "I'll send word to the company's nearest agent and have it fixed so's your pay is made big enough to turn you loose to fight as well as drive."

"We've stayed here gabbin' long enough," grunted the driver. "Any one that's goin' to ride with me has got to hump hisself."

With this warning he rushed from the station and clambered on to the box, the passengers frantically following, fearing lest they might be left behind. Uncle Dick watched them scramble through the door and, after the driver had straightened out his long lash in an admonitory crack, soliloquized:

"Sorry the day when the old-timers passed out! If Dick Curtes hadn't been killed at the foot of the Spanish Peaks in 'forty-seven, and could 'a' been there at the Devil's Elbow! If he'd been there and armed only with a hick'ry switch he'd 'a' took the fighting to them. Lord! What a time it would 'a' been if Al Thorpe could 'a' set in Bill's place instead of being wiped out by the 'Paches at Pawnee Rock! Gone, all gone, the reg'lar he-critters. Old Tom Tobin or Jim Hobbs—any of the real ones! Lord! I almost wish I'd been there myself!"

He remained by the gate and stared after the coach as it lurched up the last grade and dipped from view. Then, with bowed head and thoughtful mien, he withdrew indoors and carefully oiled and charged his small arsenal of weapons.

Since the toll-road had opened, more than one Galloping Dick had paused at the station to partake of the excellent fare. With the plains and the mountains weltering beneath a chaos of humanity, it was neither good policy nor sound life insurance to pry into a wayfarer's antecedents. Keepers of stations accepted guests without questions. As Uncle Dick recalled various suspicious characters who had hurriedly sought refreshment at his table, he was able to check them off as lone operators, invariably destined to enjoy short shrift. Among this gentry he was able to recall none who was capable of systematizing highway robbery. They were all good enough material for bold workmanship, but scarcely competent for perfecting an

organization. Even Chuckle-Luck and Boy Charlie, both daring to rashness, could never hold a band together for any length of time.

He had known of a coach being robbed on one side of the pass and being held up, empty, on the opposite grade, evidencing an entire lack of communication between the road-agents. Now, out of nowhere, came the story that a master hand at business was coordinating these lawless activities. Turkey Bill had quoted Joe Peace, a well-known prospector, who in turn had heard it from a trader. Uncle Dick, however, had listened to much, in a similar vein, in the idle talk of freighters and passing soldiers.

An organized band of outlaws demanded an adequate hiding-place and an extensive base of supplies. Twenty men could not scatter and then reappear and act in unison. To be effective they must be kept together, be provisioned and ever ready to act on information furnished to their leader by spies. He looked through the window toward the Spanish Peaks, brave monuments to Dick Curtes of the unconquered heart, and sighed for his own vanished youth, for the backing of a Curtes or a Thorpe.

"I reckon we could 'a' got at the truth of it mighty sharp," he mused.

Walking to the back door, he loudly called:

"Hi! Hi! The Quail!"

Almost immediately a squaw came from the cook-house and asked in the Arapaho language:

"Cut-Hand calls the Quail?"

Uncle Dick was held in great affection by the Arap-

ahoes and was safe with them at any time, regardless of what wars they might be waging against the whites. He was known by them as "Cut-Hand" because two fingers were missing from his left hand.

"The Quail will ask her people if they know of any bad white men who make war on white men, who steal from stage-coaches. If they know of any the Quail will tell Cut-Hand where they hide," he said.

"Cut-Hand shall be told what he asks," she readily promised. "Some of the men of my people who come here have said the bad whites are many along the river road."

"Why have you not told me?"

She stared at him blankly and made no response. He repeated the question and added:

"Does the Quail wish to go back to her people and live in a lodge and grow thin in winter when the buffaloes can not be found?"

A flicker of alarm shone in her small eyes, but she stolidly replied:

"Why should the Arapahoes care if white men rob white men?"

Uncle Dick tugged at his gray locks and whimsically retorted:

"Why, indeed? But now I must know. Also ask your men if they have seen or heard of a white woman near the pass."

She winced and in a low voice informed him:

"There is talk in our lodges of a medicine-woman—a white woman—who has been seen on the upper waters of the Purgatory. One of Hosa's braves tried

to catch her. He did not come back. His pony came back with blood on him."

"Served him right for chasing a white woman," grumbled Uncle Dick in English. Then in Arapaho: "She is a mystery-woman! No Indian can catch her. Bring me any talk you hear among your people."

Returning to the front of the station, he gazed lovingly on each white tooth of distant peak and proudly decided:

"A whole army could hide up anywhere on either side of Raton Pass—if it could get grub. But the more there are in a gang the easier it oughter be to round them up."

His ruminations were disturbed by a clatter of hoofs and the approach of two horsemen up the north slope of the pass. Raising the gate Uncle Dick observed the two men were strangers and were mounted on superior animals. What further focused his attention were the four revolvers thrust into each man's belt. In addition to this lavish armament, each carried a rifle strapped to the saddle. Uncle Dick was convinced they were agents but his gaze remained placid as he asked:

"Riding right along, or will you come eat?"

"We'll eat if you can be mighty quick in rustling the grub," the elder of the couple replied.

Leading the way into the eating-room, Uncle Dick soon galvanized the cook-house into activity, and a Mexican brought food. Retaining their belts of weapons, the strangers dropped down at the table and ate hungrily.

They talked but little and were very courteous to the Mexican waiter. After losing the edge of their appetites they commented briefly on the excellence of the fare, but spoke nothing of interest until the younger man remarked:

"You can't mix petticoats and business without having—to pay."

His companion silenced him with a frown and cast a quick glance at Uncle Dick, who stood gazing absent-mindedly through the window. Uncle Dick had heard the young man's declaration. It was the second time that day his patrons had mentioned a woman, and his thoughts grew speculative. Rising hurriedly, the two profusely thanked their host and promised to avail themselves of his good cheer again at the first opportunity. Then, throwing down two gold-pieces and tossing a third to the Mexican they hastened forth as if bent on imperative business.

As they rode up the grade Uncle Dick nodded thoughtfully and mused:

"Yes, sir! If there's any truth in what I hear, them two belong to the new outfit of agents, but they can't be planning to fuss with the east-bound coach at the foot of the pass, for they must know Turkey Bill has met it by this time and warned the guards to be on the watch. Besides, they won't want to operate in broad daylight so near the station, and the coach will be here before dark."

Believing the coach, now somewhere laboring up the south slope, was safe from any larcenous attentions, Uncle Dick dismissed the matter from his mind. The

sun completed its western path and balanced on the horizon. The dusk already had preempted the lowlands when the creaking of wheels came from the crest of the pass, punctuated by an explosive voice cursing the mules. Uncle Dick lighted his pipe and puffed a streak of blue smoke toward the top of the ridge, to the earth and sky and the world-quarters—the Indian's prayer—and stood by the road as the coach swept down the slope and came to a jangling, plunging halt.

As he recognized the driver he lowered his pipe and stared in amazement.

"Joe Peace!" he exclaimed. "How long since you quit prospecting to herd stage cattle?"

"Since we were jumped half-way down the pass in the narrowest part of the cañon," wrathfully retorted Peace, bending over to drag something from the boot. "I was inside, asleep, when they plugged the driver and stuck a gun under my nose. Cleaned me out and took the box."

"Good lord! Killed the driver?" gasped Uncle Dick.

Peace grunted and drew the inanimate form toward the wheel. Two station employees ran forward and helped to ease the body to the ground.

"He's alive," said Peace. "Seems the lead creased his skull. Reckon he'll pull through."

Uncle Dick gave orders for the unconscious man to be carried to a room, adding:

"I'll be right in and fix him up. No passengers, I see."

"I was the only one, and I was asleep, damn it!"

grumbled Peace. "For some fool reason they sent the coach out without guards. On the other divisions they're sending guards of soldiers. Up here they let them go without a gun to protect them, excepting the driver's, and his hands are full of reins. I kept my eyes peeled till just before we struck the cañon. I'd hesitate to put up a fight when there's passengers round to get hurt, but being alone I'd planned to take the trouble to them. But nothing happened and when we entered the cañon it didn't seem that there could be any danger, so I snoozed off. If only I'd kept awake fifteen minutes longer!"

"You'd probably got shot."

"There was only two of them. I only ask a chance to risk it when no tenderfeet are round," was the fierce reply.

"No use fretting over spilled express-boxes," soothed Uncle Dick. "Come in and eat while I look at the driver. Seeing as how neither Las Vegas nor Cimarron City whisky can kill him, I reckon he'll be on his pins in a day or so. And, Joe, I can give a good description of the two critters who held you up."

"You can?" cried Peace, his eyes blazing. "Tell me! They had masks on. I want to meet up with them again. Fix the driver and come back and tell me."

Long accustomed to treating gun-shot and knife wounds, Uncle Dick speedily fixed up the injured man in a workmanlike manner and rejoined Peace at the table. He briefly described the two men who had been his guests that day. Peace leaned back, his eyes blank,

as he essayed to paint their likeness on his memory. With a jerk of his handsome head he declared:

"I've got them now. I feel pretty sure of running into them down the line somewhere when they go in to blow their loot."

"There ought to be a big reward for their heads," mused Uncle Dick.

"Company's offering five thousand per head, dead or alive," informed Peace.

"Shoo! I never knew it. Let ten thousand slip away from my table," regretted Uncle Dick. Then he whimsically suggested: "It would pay you to stick round the trail and fill up a cart with the critters and haul them into Cimarron City. You'd make more that way than by prospecting."

"I may do that same thing yet," quietly replied Peace. "As to what you reckon is my fool habit of prowling round to find gold near Raton Pass, I'll show you that all the gold in this region hasn't been uncovered yet."

"Oh, you'll hit if you keep on long enough," encouraged Uncle Dick, then, reflectively, "But two hold-ups in a day is a little more'n the company can stand."

"What?"

Uncle Dick told of the first hold-up, and asked: "Didn't Turkey Bill tell you what had happened to his coach?"

"He bawled out something as he went by us, but his animals were on the dead run and he had all he could do to stick to the seat. I didn't catch what he said."

"Two of his passengers swear they saw a woman on a horse up on Devil's Elbow. Say she was looking down on the road and watching the agents go through the coach."

"A woman!" exclaimed Peace, pushing back from the table and staring in amazement at Uncle Dick.

"If only one of them had said he'd seen her I'd 'a' thought he was light-headed, but two of them could hardly be took the same way, even if both was crazy. Then again, one of the agents that held you up, while sitting in the very chair you're in now, allowed it never paid to mix business and petticoats. Somehow I've yoked his words up with what Turkey Bill's passengers said they saw."

"But a woman! A white woman! Out here in the pass and up on Devil's Elbow?" incredulously protested Peace. "I can't believe it."

"Take it or leave it," said Uncle Dick, and, grinning broadly as he saw a new interest creeping into Peace's daredevil countenance, he added: "Queer rinktums on the old trail when lovely young women stand by and watch a hold-up."

"If two men say they saw her, there must be something in it," slowly conceded Peace. "But it's mighty queer."

"What do you know about this new man some folks is saying has come up here to put a little ginger and method into road-agenting?"

Peace scowled blackly and replied:

"I only know what's drifted out of Las Vegas. Down there they swear that Chuckle-Luck and Boy

Charlie were induced to work together by a man known as Ralph—the same Ralph who worked in California ten years ago."

"But that Ralph was killed," said Uncle Dick.

"Maybe, but Las Vegas and Sante Fé say he is still alive, that he escaped to Mexico and has stayed there until now. The story is that he takes advantage of the Indian troubles to come up here and tap the trail. It's believed that he reckoned on making some rich hauls while the troops were busy chasing the redskins. You'll find men in the Taos Valley who thoroughly believe that the Ralph of California is a descendant of that Ralph who was active in Captain Pike's day, some sixty years ago."

"I don't believe it. More likely some cuss has sneaked the name, not having made one for himself. When I come here, a boy with Colonel St. Vrain, the old-timers at Bent's Fort used to tell yarns about the original, Simon-pure Ralph. He was some hellion. Zebulon Pike says he was credited with some five hundred killings. But of course he had only Mexicans to deal with. Used to go round as a priest or a peon, spot his victims, and do for them. But none of the old-timers ever let on that he left a son to carry on the black work."

"Oh, I don't put any particular stock in the yarns," said Peace. "But all this talk sort of makes this new chap more interesting, that's all."

"Calls himself Ralph?"

"Gentleman Ralph."

"Mighty modest cuss, ain't he?"

Peace returned the smile and said:

"If he's the same man who stirred things up in California we can look for some exciting times between the Purgatory and the Pecos. Now, I reckon I must drive that damn' coach through to the next station."

"If the agents have organized you won't be held up again, if that's any comfort," Uncle Dick cheerfully remarked.

From early youth Uncle Dick had displayed a shrewd business mind. Many old mountain men, on discovering their day had closed, had drifted aimlessly up and down the foot-hills, the mock of the Beaver God. Their destiny was to eke out a precarious existence until old age or the Indians sent them over the western trail. Uncle Dick, however, was quick to see the door closing on the old order.

Laboriously he had built the toll-road and obtained charters from the Colorado and New Mexico Legislatures in order that he might remain in the mountains he loved without being a prey to want. He had contributed a life of energy that the West might be accessible to home-makers, but he had no notion of losing his equity now that civilized development had gained a foothold. Aside from his commercial astuteness he felt a pathos as he viewed the shifting scenes that prefaced the incoming of the new life.

Over on Smoky Hill River the Kansas Pacific Railroad had been pushed through to Fort Harker, an iron trail that overnight transformed every region it penetrated. The day of the buffalo was ended. Stage-

coaches since the early 'fifties had followed the ancient Indian trails. The attempt to push through the Bozman Trail to the Montana gold-fields had resulted in the Fetterman Massacre, so-called. To one whose life bridged from the old to the new there was pathos aplenty.

Perhaps it was sympathy with his lost youth that inclined Uncle Dick to melancholy as he smoked his evening pipe under the stars and stared through the night toward the scenes of dead adventures. His early manhood had been molded in the stirring life of Bent's Fort and had been encompassed by the primeval. Ghosts of old companions stalked through his reverie and gave him a sense of loneliness. Never again would they ride to the trappers' rendezvous at Brown's Hole on Green River, or to the old Pueblo Fort on the Arkansas. At times Uncle Dick felt like one marooned; he belonged to a genus no longer possible, and his act of puffing his smoke to sky and earth might have been his unspoken farewell to the brave spirits who had played the part of men and who had given way before machinery.

"I reckon those was reg'lar times," he softly summed it all up.

"Ho! The gate!" Like the bark of a gun a sharp voice called.

Covering the bowl of his glowing pipe with his left hand, Uncle Dick glided along the fence. In the faint starlight he could discern three forms afoot.

"Well, what is it? Want to go through?" he quietly asked.

With a startled exclamation the figure nearest the fence jumped back, then laughed sheepishly.

"What are you? A ghost? You nearly scared the liver out of me. Of course we want to go through. Think we come here to look at the scenery?"

"You might be in a worse business," Uncle Dick calmly retorted as he lifted the gate. "Go inside and they'll rustle you some grub."

"We've got a young woman here who fell from her horse. We want you to look after her till she is able to travel. Her nag's down the trail a bit. I'll go after him while my friend helps you to get the woman indoors."

Uncle Dick now observed that one of the figures was muffled in a blanket and was supported in an upright position by the two men. Relieving one of the men, he asked:

"Where's your horses? You men can't be afoot."

"Just back here a ways. I'll fetch them when I get the girl's nag."

The speaker turned away and made down the road. The other, aided by Uncle Dick, carried the muffled form into the station.

"She's got a bump on the head," gruffly informed the man as they placed the woman on a rustic settee.

"Fell off her horse, eh?" questioned Uncle Dick, glancing sharply at the stranger.

He was startled to behold that one of the fellow's ears was notched just as Boy Charlie's was said to be.

"I reckon," the stranger replied, turning his back to the light.

"We found her lying in the road, her nag bolting along the edge of the pine growth."

"See that she doesn't roll off," warned Uncle Dick as he walked to the back door.

Throwing this open, he called loudly for the Quail. When the squaw entered from the cook-house he rapidly explained:

"A white woman is hurt. She is the medicine-woman I told you about. Get her to bed. I will dress her wound."

"Cut-Hand will cure her," complacently replied the squaw.

Her faith in Uncle Dick was complete. She turned back a fold of the blanket and exclaimed aloud in unison with Uncle Dick, for they were gazing upon a face of winsome beauty despite the pallor induced by her unconscious state.

"Preety!" softly cried the squaw in English. Then in her native tongue, "How did the medicine-woman walk here?"

As she spoke she gently drew back the brown hair and revealed an ugly contusion above the right temple.

"She was brought here by two men. This man——"

Uncle Dick halted and gaped blankly. The man had vanished. On the end of the settee was a handful of gold-pieces.

Uncle Dick stepped to the door and listened. Down the trail hoofs were clattering, and they were retreating rather than advancing. With a shrug of annoyance he bruskly commanded:

"Get her fixed up in bed so I can 'tend to her."

As they were lifting her from the settee the girl opened her eyes and an expression of horror twisted her features. She stared at them without seeing them. Uncle Dick noted how the pupils of her eyes widened, how her lips grimaced as if she beheld something painted by her jumbled fancies.

"Skeletons!" she faintly exclaimed. "Dead men's bones! The river! The river!"

With convulsive strength she straightened out in their arms and opened her mouth as if about to scream. Then, with a sigh, she collapsed and again became unconscious.

"Preety!" quietly admired the squaw, gathering her up in her stout arms and carrying her through a doorway.

"Dernedest queerest hold-up I ever run into," muttered Uncle Dick helplessly.

CHAPTER II

MARY JUNE

UNCLE DICK and Joe Peace sat outside the door, smoking and speculating on the identity of the fair stranger inside. Five days had elapsed since her arrival and there was no clue as to her antecedents. Not even her name was known.

Uncle Dick at first had assumed that the blow on the head was responsible for her wild words, but the hurt quickly responded to his simple treatment and there was no suggestion of a fracture. A passing army surgeon had examined her and gave it as his opinion that a terrific mental shock, rather than the wound, was the cause of her queer behavior. She was up and dressed but seldom left her room. She would remain for hours staring straight ahead like one in a trance. When she spoke she did not rave, but repeated the same words over and over as if recalling something memorized. Her enunciation was low and monotonous as if she herself grew weary of the repetition.

Peace was strangely attracted to her at first sight, but she did not seem to heed his presence on the rare occasions when she came into the eating-room. When he softly addressed her, however, she would always turn

and gaze at him. One hopeful sign was the light of recognition flashing in her wide gray eyes when Uncle Dick would approach and with gruff gentleness talk to her. It was evident she was rested by his presence. The Arapaho woman also met with her approval, for one day she ventured to the kitchen and took the squaw by the hand and led her to her room, thereby signifying she desired her company.

"Getting to be quite a hospital," remarked Peace as he finished his pipe.

"The driver'll be all right to ship out to-morrow," grunted Uncle Dick, "but that piece of calico gets me all muddled up. Caught both my hands this morning and pressed them to her head. What do you think of that?"

With poorly suppressed pride he lifted his square, rough hands and stared at them wonderingly.

"It quiets her when you stroke her head," mumbled Peace. "I noticed this morning how she nearly went to sleep in her chair. Poor child!"

The Arapaho woman appeared in the doorway behind them and fastened her little eyes on Uncle Dick. He impatiently demanded:

"Well, what's the row now?"

"Preety," she said.

"Preety" was her name for the fair stranger.

"She needs me?" asked Uncle Dick sharply, rising and laying aside his pipe.

The squaw turned and disappeared. Uncle Dick accepted her abrupt withdrawal as an affirmative and, growling a complaint but with his kindly eyes revealing his eagerness to help the unfortunate, he entered the

station. Peace lounged in after him, his dark handsome face sober and frowning. The girl had made a tremendous impression on him.

Uncle Dick was surprised to find the girl in the eating-room. She was standing by the fireplace and plucking idly at a fan of dried grass that ornamented the rough shelf. She did not look round at their entrance but continued staring at the fagots in the fireplace. Uncle Dick was reluctant to disturb her and stood undecided, waiting for her to come to him. Peace sank into a chair where he could watch her profile. Uncle Dick fumbled at his chin and glanced helplessly at Peace. The girl now began, speaking with disquieting precision:

"Skeletons—dead men's bones. The walls of the cañon are very close together. The river crowds the ledge until it is only a narrow strip, hardly wide enough for horses in single file. The water makes a loud noise and tells awful secrets. Dead men's bones and——"

With a quiver that registered over her whole slight figure, she pressed her hands to her eyes and opened her mouth as if to shriek, but made no sound.

She had spoken and acted thus many times. Her abrupt pause and the uncompleted sentence was always followed by the pantomime of shrieking.

"Dead men's bones and what?" gently murmured Peace.

He had argued with Uncle Dick that should she complete the gruesome statement, they might obtain a clue that would establish the locality she referred to in her wild speech.

"Shhh! None of that," fiercely whispered Uncle Dick.

But he had no need to be alarmed. The girl was unconscious of Peace's prompting. Bowing her head, her lips fluttered, and they knew she was whispering the same words she had uttered aloud. In proof of this there came the little shiver; the head was raised and the lips parted as if to cry out.

Uncle Dick exclaimed profanely under his breath and, advancing, placed his hands on her shoulders, gently induced her to sit and then began stroking her head with his strong hands. Over his shoulder he softly remarked:

"Her talk about the cañon and the river makes me think of the Purgatory."

"No more than any other of a dozen rivers that flow between high walls," murmured Peace.

"She ain't crazy," continued Uncle Dick, "only she don't seem to hear any one speak. Like as if she was asleep. I've tried questioning her a dozen times, but there's something between us I can't get by."

The girl lifted her hands and caught his palms and pressed them convulsively.

"You poor thing!" pitied Uncle Dick, his heart aching for her. "It's a damn' shame, you poor child."

Suddenly the door at the end of the long room opened and the wounded driver stood on the threshold, one arm in a sling, for he had been shot through the arm as well as wounded in the head. Resting his free hand against the door-casing for support and wagging his bandaged head peevishly, he announced:

"I'm goin' to get outer here to-morrer, sure pop. When a man's dog-sick an' can't git a friendly drink o' licker it's time he goes where he can be treated right."

He had managed to strap on his belt, and, fumbling at the long revolver, he staggered a few steps into the room.

The girl was facing him and at first stared at him without perceiving him. Then came a dramatic change as the driver's bandage slipped down from his scalp and rested across the bridge of his nose, allowing only his eyes to be seen. The girl stiffened and, throwing both hands to her head, screamed in terror.

Peace leaped across the room, roughly pushed the driver back into his chamber and rebuked:

"You fool! You've scared her about to death. Keep out of sight."

Turning back, he beheld Uncle Dick at the girl's door delivering the patient into the care of the Quail.

"What'n devil, Joe, set her off like that?" Uncle Dick helplessly asked. "Think I could 'a' pulled her hair, or been rough with her in any way? My old hands ain't as soft as they might be."

"Nothing like that, Uncle Dick. It was the driver. The fool looked a fright. That bandage slipped down and made him look hideous."

Uncle Dick pondered and finally agreed:

"Maybe it was that, only she ain't 'peared to notice things before. The driver did look mighty unwholesome. With that bandage across the lower part of his face he made me think of an agent."

"Road-agent!" ejaculated Peace.

"Yes, sir!" Uncle Dick struck his fist on the table violently. "I reckon I assayed out something top-high, as you prospectors put it. I reckon I hit the right note without knowing it. We never found out how she was hurt or who brought her here, but I'm sure the two men who fetched her was agents. The driver, with his ugly mug half covered, made her remember some things."

"Wish the sight of him had made her finish out her sentence of 'Dead men's bones and——' " muttered Peace. "Then we might have something to go on."

"When I was taking her to her room I heard her whisper, 'And gold.' Maybe that's what she's been leaving unsaid."

Peace pursed his lips and scowled.

"It doesn't make any sense," he said.

"None of it makes sense," snorted Uncle Dick, now walking the floor and waving his hands. "But one thing's sure as shooting: there ain't no stage-driver nor any other human being that's going to fuss that little girl up if I know myself, and I reckon I do."

"A river flowing through a cañon—skeletons and gold," mused Peace.

"That seems to be about the sum of it," snapped out Uncle Dick. "A pretty mess of stuff for a young girl to have to tote round in her mind!"

Before Peace could make any reply the Arapaho woman thrust her head from the girl's room and softly said:

"Preety!"

"Oh, lord! What's happened now?" groaned Uncle Dick, hastening forward as the squaw opened the door for him to enter.

Peace made as if to follow him, thought better of it and threw himself on the settee.

On entering the room, Uncle Dick was nonplused by the marvelous change that had come over the girl. The pallid face was flushed; the eyes, while brimming with fear and excitement, were sentient. She took a step forward and, for nearly a minute, searched Uncle Dick's compassionate eyes intently, read them truly and thrust out both hands. He took them and patted them, holding the two in one broad palm, but he felt weak and helpless when she whispered:

"Who am I?"

"Holy Hen!" he spluttered. "Why—er—s'pose you tell all that to your Uncle Dick."

"Uncle Dick," she slowly repeated. "Did I ever have an Uncle Dick, I wonder?"

"You sure got one now," he warmly declared.

"I know I'm a person. I can identify myself that far. I can almost see pictures of a wide plaza. There's the Alameda—*Alameda!* Where did I get that?"

As she halted and gazed half frightened into his sympathetic face he promptly returned:

"In Santa Fé. That's where you got that. I'll bet a jug on it. Young woman, you're beginning to remember things. Now don't you fuss any. You got a tunk on the head that's made you forget a bit. Army surgeon said something about your brain being clogged—that something would jolt your memory

awake some time. By Hen! The cure's beginning, and I'm tickled to death."

"But who am I?" she persisted, and, with a little shudder, added: "I must have a name. I must be some one—not just something."

"You've got a name and a derned pretty one," he warmly assured. "It'll come hopping back to you any minute. Till it does—lemme see. It's the tag end of June. Once I knew a likely young girl who was called Mary. S'pose we call you Mary June till things clear up a bit?"

"Mary June," she softly repeated. "Yes, I like that. I like you. I know you've been very kind to me. The sisters used to say—the sisters!"

"Convent!" cried Uncle Dick. "I knowed the first shot from the gun that you didn't talk like homespun girls that come across the plains in wagon-trains. You've lived in a convent in either New or Old Mexico. Now you just take it easy, and if things don't straighten all out in that brain of yours mighty soon I'll take you to Santa Fé and find out all about you. Now you're getting along so well, I want you to step into the next room and meet a young friend of mine, a young man that's been a heap worried about you."

She walked by his side into the eating-room, but made to draw back abashed when Peace impulsively advanced, his hands outstretched.

"This is Joe Peace," said Uncle Dick, placing one of her hands in Joe's. "Joe, this is Mary June—almost well again."

"I've been mighty much concerned about you, Miss

June," cried Peace. "That you're getting well is the best news I ever heard."

"But I don't remember things," she sighed, withdrawing her hand. "There was something, something I was afraid of, I think. If I could get back of that I'd know all about myself and to whom I belong."

Uncle Dick stirred up the envy in Peace's soul by quickly reminding:

"You belong to me, my dear, till some one can claim you. I reckon that Mary June will have to change mighty soon to Mary Wooton. That is, if you could stand for the name of Wooton."

"You're good to me," she whispered, touching his hand to her cheek.

Gliding from him, she hastened back to her room and the waiting Arapaho woman.

As the door closed on her, Joe Peace exploded:

"That girl is thoroughly normal now, even if she can't remember her past. Isn't that so, Uncle Dick?"

"I reckon that's so," agreed the mountaineer.

"She needs a protector!"

Uncle Dick smiled and quizzically remarked:

"But she's got one—me—Richens Lacy Wooton. Queer how young men are keen to see the need of beautiful young women having protectors."

Peace frowned, then laughed and confessed:

"My cards are all down, face up. She's completely upset me. But the game's open and I'm going to make a try. No harm in that, eh?"

Wooton's face took on the stern rugged lines of the gray walls banking Raton Pass as he warned:

"Not too fast, lad. Till she gets back her name she's my girl."

"Meaning you object to me as her husband?" hotly demanded Peace.

"Take your spurs off, Joe," cautioned Uncle Dick. "We'll give 'Miss Preety' a chance to learn who she is before we plan any husband for her. If she don't pick up right smart I'll take her to Fort Leavenworth and have the surgeons examine her. But I don't reckon it's any physical hurt. Something give her an awful shock and clogged her mem'ry."

"And it'll take other shocks to restore her," mumbled Peace.

"So I reckon. The stage-coach driver give her one, and she's remembered a lot. When she gets another jolt she'll remember more, maybe all."

"But what if she never remembers the past? She's still normal from now on," persisted Peace. "She has a right to her life—to happiness."

"Never a truer word said, boy," readily agreed Uncle Dick. "But happiness doesn't absolutely mean she's got to rush off and get married to the first likely-looking chap that wants her. But say she did marry a chap, then had her mem'ry come back and tell her she knew some other chap she liked a heap better. Her happiness then would become misery, eh?"

"Not a chance in a million," was the optimistic reply.

"Well, maybe not, but my girl can't even take that one chance. And again, for all we know she may be already married!"

This suggestion caused Peace to drop back heavily on the settee, his face reflecting the concern the thought was giving him. Then his visage hardened and he declared:

"If she's married her man ought to be here to take care of her. I'll wait a decent length of time but I'm making the game."

"You'll wait till I say the word before you show your hand," was the calm retort. "And I'll bet a jug you don't hanker to start any love-making on these premises against the wishes of your Uncle Dick."

Peace forced a laugh and exclaimed:

"Hang it, Uncle Dick, have pity on a fellow! Why not test her mind a bit. So far she's talked of the sisters and the Alameda."

"Slow and careful. I'll do what I can to find out who she is and how in Hen she ever come wandering up Raton Pass. The two critters who fetched her here makes it all the more queer—the way they dusted from this station after telling me that they found her lying in the road. Who is she? How came she up here? How did she get hurt?"

"I'm impatient but I don't want to be unreasonable," sighed Peace, rising and walking away.

For the rest of the day he avoided Uncle Dick's company, yet kept near the station in hope of seeing the girl. Night came, however, without his having caught a glimpse of her. Securing his horse, he rode down the south slope into the shadows.

That evening as Uncle Dick sat alone in the doorway the girl came from her room and gained his side with-

out his hearing her. His first intimation of her presence was when her hand rested on his head. With never a tremor to advertise his surprise, he reached up and patted her hand and sought to draw her down beside him.

"No," she resisted, pulling on his hand. "Come inside to the light where I can see you. We're alone?"

"No one here but the help and they're in the cookhouse," he answered, rising and leading her to the table.

"I've spoken of the Alameda and the sisters but I can't remember anything about them—just vague pictures that may be imagination, or that may be real," she murmured. "Now here's another. And it troubles me. It's so clear that I've sketched it out. What comes before or after, I don't know. Whether it's a real place or a picture of a place, I don't know. Here! Look!"

She placed before him a scrap of paper containing an excellent sketch of a tumbling river shut in by high cañon walls. The composition was grim and forbidding, as if some of the tragedy in her mind had crept through the pencil. A narrow trail clung to the right bank of the river, and on the edge of this stood a stunted pine, twisted and distorted by the elements, misshapen as if tortured by Furies, yet tenaciously holding to life.

He stared at the sketch admiringly, then down at the slim hands and softly cried:

"Mary June, you're a reg'lar artist. That's what I call a real picter. It beats the picters drawn by a fellow called Catlin, who was out here when I was breaking into the country, all holler."

"But have you seen that place? Do you recognize it?" she anxiously asked.

"Maybe," he guardedly replied. "It's much like several places I've seen, only I don't remember that pine. Looks like the devil had given it a mauling. Still, I've seen so many sickly pines along Raton Creek that no single one would probably stick out in my mem'ry."

She gave a little despairing sigh and fingered the pencil nervously.

"I hoped you had seen it," she said.

He hesitated, fearing to upset her mental balance, then risked:

"Before you got better you kept speaking of such a place. You said the cañon walls was close together, and there they be, as true as life. You 'lowed the river kept whispering secrets——"

"Whispering!" she softly exclaimed, an expression of alarm clouding her gray eyes. "But it was men that whispered, not the river. They stood apart from me and whispered. But, if I learned what they whispered about, I can't recall it now."

"How do you know all this?"

She twisted her hands and shook her head.

"It's gone, yet I can almost see the men—almost hear them whispering."

She was silent for a few moments, then murmured:

"Now it comes back again. They're whispering about me."

"Hoity-toity! There, there," soothed Uncle Dick, patting her hand. "We're getting all fussed up again."

"But I'm not afraid of the men. I mean I wasn't afraid when they stood off away from me and talked. Did I say anything else about the river or the trail under the cañon wall?"

"Not a blessed word," Uncle Dick assured her.

She drew the paper to her and poised the pencil, then sank back irresolute.

"You was reckoning to add something to the picter?" he gently queried.

"It's an impression. It's a crazy notion. I—I fear I haven't recovered as much as I had hoped."

In great alarm Uncle Dick opened his mouth to call the Arapaho woman, then was inspired to advise:

"Chuck it down on the paper. If it's on your mind you won't feel comfortable till you've got it out. Never mind how silly it seems. No one will know but you and me. Maybe it'll help you to stop thinking about it."

She took the paper and bent over it as if to shield it from his gaze. He leaned back and stared at the ceiling. At last she timidly pushed the paper before him, saying:

"It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't belong in the picture and yet it seems to be a very real part of it, now that I've drawn it."

Uncle Dick smiled genially and bent forward only to exclaim in amazement at beholding several skeletons of human beings against the wall of the cañon, back of the pine.

"I'll be cussed!" he faintly cried.

"Oh, I know it's awful," she sobbed, trying to draw the paper away from his grasp.

"It's sense! You talked about them before you got better," he informed her, staying her hand and staring round-eyed at the tiny fingers. "I didn't go for to mention it for fear it would upset you. But now you've put them down, it all goes to show you're beginning to remember. Funny place for dead men's bones, though."

"It should be quite dark around them," she absently informed him.

"Why?" he shot out.

With a little start she stared at him blankly, then grew puzzled and slowly answered:

"Why? I don't know. Just seems as if it should."

"But you've got them plastered up against the cliff," he protested.

"I know. It seemed idiotic when I drew them, yet that's the only place they seem to belong."

He pursed his lips and studied the sketch anew. Its excellence as a sketch was destroyed because of the skeletons. It was now a grotesque impossibility. He stole a sidelong glance at her brooding profile and felt a chill. The drawing, as she had completed it, contained the gruesomely absurd motif one might expect from a diseased mind. He fought against the suggestion as she lifted her head and turned to him appealingly. Rapping the paper with a finger, he promised:

"Mary June, you're all right in the head. Don't forget that. Don't fret. You'll see no dead men round these parts. You just sit tight and get strong. I'm going to find that spot just to prove to you that you're

all hunky-dory. You was hurt near here. This picter place must be near here. I ain't prowled round these old mountains ever since I was nineteen to be tripped up in finding a spot so all-fired well pictered out as this bit of a river cañon."

"You're good," she replied simply, clasping both hands over his broad shoulder. "The other man, Mr. Peace—you won't show it to him, or say anything about it to him, will you?"

"Not if you don't wish it," he promised; "but he's done lots of prospecting and might be able to spot it the first thing."

"No, don't! He might laugh at me."

"What!" roared Uncle Dick.

"Not so bad as that, perhaps, but he'd think I was worse in my mind," she modified.

"I'd hate to find a man laughing at any of my women folks," growled Uncle Dick. "'Specially if he had folks who'd feel cut up over his passing out. Now you take it easy. Stick close to the station. I'm going to be gone for a few days."

"You think you may find this?" she asked, tapping the sketch.

"I'll at least make sure it ain't in this neighborhood. I'll say good-by to-night, as I shall hit the trail early. The Arapaho woman will look after you. Some of her relations will be hanging round to see what they can steal, but don't be afraid of them."

"You're running into danger. You may meet Indians."

"Most of them are up Smoky Hill way. I shan't

meet any but Arapahoes, and I'm something of a pet with that tribe. Little Raven and Yaller Bear both have told me that they're willing to meet Colonel Leavenworth and sign a treaty. Even if they don't sign a treaty, but make it a reg'lar fight with Hancock's men, I don't reckon they'll trouble me. Not to put too strong a point to it, Miss Mary, they're rather fond of me. I've mixed with them ever since I was a younker, so don't fuss any."

That night before retiring he visited the cook-house and found the Quail entertaining several of her people. There were three men and as many women in the party, and, by the air of complete satisfaction on the several countenances, Uncle Dick knew a collation had been served at his expense.

"My Arapaho brothers are welcome," greeted Uncle Dick.

"Hau!" grunted a tall brave, bolting the chunk of venison he had attempted to hide in his cheek.

"Cut-Hand is always glad to see the warriors of Hosa. I am going away. You will stay here till I come back."

Guttural satisfaction was expressed. Uncle Dick continued:

"I leave a white woman in care of the Quail. My brothers will watch over her if she walks from the station while I am gone, and see no harm comes to her. Big Knife will see to it that she is here when I come back."

The tall brave grunted explosively. Uncle Dick motioned the three men to follow him, led the way to

the living-room and tapped on the girl's door. She opened it and started back at sight of the Indians.

"Mary June, these are my friends. They will be your friends. They will be here while I am gone. You won't see much of them, but they will always be at hand to keep an eye on you," explained Uncle Dick.

Stepping back, he waited till she had closed the door. Then he softly informed them:

"She has been touched by the Great Spirit," he said, tapping his head.

"The white squaw is a medicine-woman," muttered Big Knife, his gaze shifting about uneasily.

"How do you know that?" demanded Uncle Dick.

"Arapahoes have seen her riding along the upper Purgatory. Little Pony followed her and never came back. His pony came back."

Big Knife's bearing now suggested fear of the supernatural.

"Little Pony's heart was bad," said Uncle Dick. "Those who follow her to save her from hurt will be making big medicine. Where did she go when she rode along the Purgatory?"

"Some say she changed into a beaver and swam under the river. Some say she turned into a Thunder-Bird and flew into the sky," mumbled Big Knife.

"She is a mystery-woman," conceded Uncle Dick. "Those who watch over her will grow very strong and have full stomachs."

"Cut-Hand will find the mystery-woman here when he comes back," Big Knife assured him.

The Indians' recognition of the girl widened the

possibility of establishing her identity. One point of contact with her former life was on the lonely banks of the Purgatory. The mountaineer already had pondered over the other problem. How did she come to be with the two men who brought her to the station? These strangers were road-agents. Their story of finding her in the road rang false. The suspicion that the outlaws knew the history of the girl recalled the statement of Turkey Bill's passengers regarding the white woman on Devil's Elbow, who had watched the hold-up of the stage-coach. White women were too scarce in and around Raton Pass to allow much confusion of identity.

"Seems to be two trails what might lead to a discovery of who she really is," he mused. "One goes to the Purgatory, the other to the gang of road-agents."

The lowlands were still vague with the mists of early morning when the first rays of the sun painted the top of Raton Range and gave the signal for Uncle Dick to mount his horse and ride down the north slope of the toll-road. The way led between masses of gray rocks and thick growths of pine. At one point the road crossed a plateau, left by nature to hold a small lake. The mountaineer paused by this tranquil sheet of water to admire the Alpine plant-life mirrored in the clear depths. It was a favorite spot with him, and his errand was seldom so pressing that he could not pause for a moment to enjoy the beauty of the scene and contrast the limpid loveliness with the stern and harsh surroundings.

This morning he had scarcely reined in his horse

when something whipped by his head and plopped into the lake, creating a tiny geyser. Almost at the same moment he caught the muffled report of a gun. His brain worked automatically, and he found himself spuring his horse to the shelter of the pines at the foot of the western wall, his rifle half raised as he scanned the wooded heights. Some one, red or white, had attempted to kill him. He waited a few minutes, thinking the assassin would descend to the terrace. A shrill whistle rang out high above him, and almost instantly was answered from a point farther up the pass.

"Not Injuns!" he grimly exclaimed, riding down the slope and keeping under cover of the woods. "A white man's signal, I'll bet a jug. If I had some of the Arapaho bucks here I'd have those gentlemen's hair before sundown.—A road-agent! A gold-piece for a dinner, and a bullet in your back! Once I get Miss Mary's troubles all fixed up I certainly will interfere with their business. When they worked alone and was sure to run into a noose or a hunk of lead, it wasn't any of my partic'lar business, but this organizing into a company is carrying a joke too far. Those two signals show they're stretched all along the ridge above."

Reaching a turn in the road, he quit the cover of the pines and urged his horse into a gallop. At the bottom of one long declivity, where the morning sun had not yet penetrated and where the shadows rendered him obscure, he reined in and turned in his saddle. The lateral sunbeams were tinting the sky-line with yellow glory. The top of the slope was sharply revealed. As he waited and watched, a horseman came round the

turn and behind him rode others. The mountaineer counted ten men. Against the bright background they seemed silhouettes cut from black cardboard.

"I ain't hankering to have them at my heels," Uncle Dick explained to his horse, and, raising his rifle, he fired at the leader.

The shot threw the band into confusion. There was a scrambling and milling of horses, then in a bunch they swept back from sight. Uncle Dick rode at a reckless pace down the road, every rod taking him deeper into the gloom of the lowlands.

CHAPTER III

THE DEAD MAN'S MEDICINE

OCCASIONAL pines, stunted in growth, fought for existence at the mouth of the pass. Uncle Dick halted and reconnoitered his back trail where it emerged from grim buttes. Satisfied that none of the outlaws was following him he resumed his course for Muddy Creek, a tributary of the upper Purgatory. He sought the small trading-station kept by Baptiste, a mixed blood. In externals Baptiste was all Indian, and his red ancestry thus far had protected him from wandering war-parties. His immunity was further assured because of the lively traffic he carried on in whisky and firearms.

The volatile blood of the trader's father, a French trapper, had drawn him to the forts and settlements when a youth and, when he returned to exploit his dusky relations over the counter, he was equipped with the rudiments of a white man's education. Uncle Dick had known him for years, and no love was lost between the two, for the mountaineer had been instrumental in preventing Baptiste's appointment as an Indian agent. Yet it was to this man who, he believed, would cheerfully shoot him in the back, that Uncle

Dick was now compelled to go in search of information concerning Miss Mary.

"Wouldn't trust him alone at the bottom of a thirty-foot well, but if he knows anything about the girl I'll have it if I have to shoot it out of him," Uncle Dick grimly decided.

A gallop of a few miles and the mountaineer was clear of the broken ground and well up to the straggling cottonwoods which hid the trader's store from view. Carrying his rifle across the saddle, for the nature of his reception was doubtful, Uncle Dick allowed his mount to slow down to a walk.

Suddenly two dull reports boomed out in quick succession and sent the mountain man to the ground with his rifle raised to resent what he first fancied was an attempt at assassination.

A moment's reflection reassured him and he ventured to stand erect.

"That was a heavy Colt fired twice—else two of them fired once apiece," he mused. "Didn't hear any lead sing by. Reckon it wa'n't for me."

He was puzzled and waited a full minute for developments. Then again came the double explosion.

"I always reckoned the Injuns would turn on Baptiste some time, but so long as that gun keeps talking it shows they ain't got him yet," he soliloquized as he cautiously advanced toward the cottonwoods.

As he realized there was an entire absence of shouting, always characteristic of an Indian attack, he questioned his first solution of the mystery. Where his view of the open plain was uninterrupted he looked

in vain for racing ponies. Nor was any foe lurking in the cottonwoods directly ahead, so far as he could perceive.

Boom! Boom! rang out two shots.

This time Uncle Dick swore peevishly. Why always two reports? Nine times out of ten any mystery at the foot of Raton Range was a trap. He loosened the long revolver in his belt and played with his rifle as he endeavored to decide what course of action he should pursue. The art of minding one's own business had saved many lives in the Rockies, yet he had come for information and, while not inclined to press his quest into a zone of gun-fire, he had no desire to relinquish his errand until convinced it was hopeless.

Baptiste was obviously having trouble, and he was one man who might know something about the girl. Ordinarily the trader's demise would have met with the mountaineer's entire endorsement, but just at present he wished him to continue alive.

For the fourth time the gun, or guns, spoke twice. Thoroughly irritated and convinced that no Indians were participating in the affair, Uncle Dick climbed into his saddle and boldly rode to the edge of the grove. Dismounting and throwing the reins over the horse's head he stole forward until he had a full view of the trader's store. His eyes opened wide in surprise when he beheld a second shack across the creek and facing Baptiste's. The last time he had passed that way the breed ruled the lonely spot alone.

"That's been built some time this season," muttered Uncle Dick. "And not a sign of life anywhere," he

said, failing to discover any human being along the creek.

A more detailed scrutiny revealed further puzzling features in the situation. The doors of both shacks were open, as were the small windows. Over the windows blankets were hung, so it was impossible to see what was going on inside. As Uncle Dick combed his scattered locks with one hand, a heavy revolver was suddenly thrust from beneath the blanket over Baptiste's window and was discharged. As if enacted before a mirror, a hand appeared almost at the same moment from under the blanket across the creek, and the two reports rang out almost together. The blankets twitched a bit as the heavy bullets registered.

Uncle Dick smiled in relief at this partial explanation of what had been a mystery. It was plain some stranger had set up his abode on the creek and that he and Baptiste had had a difference and were striving to settle it by an eccentric duel.

"Some one trying to jam in and get some of the trade," murmured Uncle Dick, beginning to find much enjoyment in the little drama. "Baptiste wants to hog all of it."

Now the newcomer took the initiative, but Baptiste proved every whit as prompt in returning the fire. Uncle Dick chuckled boyishly.

"Shooting from behind a blanket and not seeing what they're shooting at," he scoffed. "Both hugging the floor and reaching up and firing blind—wasting their lead when they may need it before morning to stand off Satanta and his Kiowas, or Roman Nose and

his Cheyennes. If the Cheyennes ever cut loose they may forget Baptiste has some of their blood in his veins and remember only that he's cheated them like sin."

Suddenly the program was varied. The revolver appeared under the blanket at Baptiste's window and remained there while the breed jumped to the open door and fired a rifle. A howl of rage sounded from the other cabin, immediately followed by the appearance of a young man in the doorway. He was armed with two revolvers and, remaining in full view, he began spraying Baptiste's building, impartially raking door and window. Having emptied his guns, he receded from view. Like a jack-in-the-box Baptiste popped up at his door and resumed firing with his rifle.

Tiring of the inconclusive battle and fearing lest Baptiste might fall by a chance shot before imparting the desired information, Uncle Dick stepped from cover and in a stentorian voice called out:

"Hi, both shacks! Quit that dad-burned fooling long enough for me to do business."

The window blankets fluttered ever so little as the hidden duelist peeped out to observe the intruder. With his rifle over his left arm, the muzzle covering the stranger's shack, with a revolver in his left hand ready to rebuke any assault from Baptiste's store, Uncle Dick advanced briskly. Reaching the store-door he turned, waved his hand to the cabin across the creek and commanded:

"No more fooling or you'll settle with me!"

He paused on the threshold of the store until his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom; then he laughed silently. Baptiste was in a corner, out of range of any bullet from across the creek, and he was fortifying his fighting spirit with a dipper of rum and a long strip of cold meat. Meeting Uncle Dick's amused gaze, he scowled villainously.

"What's this mean?" Uncle Dick demanded.

The trader, already showing the effect of his potations, presented a strange picture of his two bloods. His dark face, characteristically Indian, remained somber and expressionless, but his arms and elbows hunched and flopped about as if to say:

"What would you have?"

"Your new neighbor making trouble?" persisted Uncle Dick.

"Damn' fool!" Baptiste grunted, taking a huge mouthful of meat and washing it down with a big swallow of raw spirits.

"So you've renewed your arrows and taken the war-path, eh?"

Before Uncle Dick could prevent him, Baptiste leaned forward and thrust a revolver under the blanket and fired. The shot was greeted by a cry of anger, and Uncle Dick dropped to the floor as a stream of lead whistled through the riddled blanket.

Remaining prone, the mountaineer drew bead on the trader and harshly commanded:

"Drop that gun, you brown sucker! Fire another shot while I'm here and I'll wipe you out. You know *me!*"

Baptiste sullenly dropped his weapon to the floor and glared malignantly. He then seized his dipper and drank deep. Crawling to the door, Uncle Dick waved his hat back and forth and called out:

"You, feller, over there! Quit that shooting!"

"Then quit shooting at my home!" was the wrathful reply, and a piece of lead plunked into the casing of the door within a foot of Uncle Dick's head.

With a snort of rage Uncle Dick shoved his rifle forward and peppered the window. Baptiste joyously grabbed up his revolver and fired blindly.

"Drop that gun, you infernal devil!" roared Uncle Dick to the breed, reenforcing his command with the muzzle of his rifle. "Didn't I tell you to quit that business?"

"I was helping you," mumbled Baptiste as he threw aside the revolver.

"Say, that's a pretty way to talk peace to a man," called out the stranger.

Uncle Dick rose and stepped into full view, lifted one hand and ordered:

"No more shooting. Baptiste has quit. He's put up his gun and is armed only with a dipper of licker. I ain't got but a little time to spend here, and I've come far to talk business, so just leave your irons in your shack and come over."

"Like hell I'll come over," was the jeering retort. "The way you've acted since lining up with that hound oughter fill me plumb full of confidence, eh? Git out of sight. I shall commence shooting directly."

"Look here, feller. I don't usually ask folks twice

to come and see me. You heard me speak—me, Dick Wooton."

There was silence for nearly half a minute; then in a curious voice the stranger inquired:

"Are you Uncle Dick Wooton who keeps the toll-gate up in Raton Pass?"

"I be."

"Then I'll come over. I'm depending on you to stop that dog from trying to murder me."

As he finished speaking he emerged from the shack, a tall, raw-boned fellow with a whimsical, freckled face and light-blue eyes. Wriggling his open hands before him to show he was unarmed, he splashed through the shallow creek and, with brisk step, came up to the door of the store.

Uncle Dick stood just inside to keep a watchful eye on the sullen trader. Satisfied the breed had had enough of fighting, he gave his attention to the stranger and peremptorily demanded:

"Who might you be to come a-helling round these peaceful waters, and raising Hen with an old trader like Baptiste?"

"Name's Keene, Sam Keene. I'm a trader, too," replied the young man, grinning vacuously.

"Trader, eh?" mumbled Uncle Dick. "I see—trade-war. Means both of you'll lose out."

"Bah! He's a fool!" growled Baptiste.

"Maybe I am, but it don't follow that a skunk can shoot me up," Keene retorted spiritedly.

"How long you two been fighting?" asked Uncle Dick.

"Ever since sunup," cheerfully replied Keene, now seating himself and fanning his heated face with his ragged hat. "But you're mistook somewhat. We wa'n't fighting over any trade. We was fighting over a funeral."

"A funeral?" gasped Uncle Dick.

"The miserable white cheat!" fumed Baptiste, staggering to his feet and refilling his dipper.

"You say that again and I'll come in there and mount you, visitors or no visitors!" hotly warned Keene, thrusting his head inside the door.

Uncle Dick pushed his head back and motioned for Baptiste to be quiet.

"You two quit your chinning, or I'll make it my funeral," he threatened. "Now, Mr. Keene, what do you mean by your strange words about fighting over a funeral? Whose funeral was you fighting over?"

"The feller that come in here last night with a hole drilled through him from side to side. He died some time after midnight, and we dug a grave on the bank of the crick and buried him."

"Shoo! That was neighborly. Go ahead."

"Before we planted him we looked through his clothes to see if we could find anything that told who he was. He'd refused to talk—wouldn't tell his name or anything. We didn't find anything except a small buckskin pouch tied round his neck. Baptiste said it was his medicine-bag, like what Injuns wear. Being part Injun himself he didn't want to touch it, he said. He said we must bury it with the owner—the low-down——"

"Tut, tut," cautioned Uncle Dick.

"Anyway, I agreed, not wanting to meddle with the religion of a dead man. We left it on his neck and planted him and took a drink and turned in. But just about sunup, I'll be derned if I didn't catch that low-down cuss of a Baptiste fussing round the grave. What d' you s'pose? He'd gone to work and dug the man up in the dark and had took off the buckskin bag. He thought I was dead asleep.

"When I looked out he had finished filling in the grave and was making to open the bag. I fetched a yell and took a shot. He dropped the bag and run in here. I started to get the bag when he begin shooting at me from the winder. What kind of neighborly action do you call that? I hustled back under cover, and that's all. We've been keeping tabs on each other ever since."

"I see. Who'd the man say he was?"

"Told you he didn't say," Keene reminded him. "He was a tall sucker; rode a good hoss. Nag's feeding round here somewhere. Piece gone from the top of one ear. We give the man a drink of whisky, even if he was pretty leaky. He said something 'bout the game being up, and pegged out. Then this ornery hound of a Baptiste robbed the body——"

"It is a lie!" snarled Baptiste, his small eyes glittering as they rested on the revolver he had placed to one side. "I am of Cheyenne blood. The medicine-bag round the dead man's neck could mean nothing to a white man. The dead man took it from some Indian.

It belonged to me. What has this man Keene to do with Indian medicine-bags? Why is he out here in the Indian's land? If he had pitched his shack alone somewhere, his hair would have been cured and dried and cut into legging-fringe long before this. The Indians will not hurt me, and they have kept away and spared him because they believed he was my friend. Now they can have him. I won't even roll out of my blankets when I wake up some night and hear them dragging him out of his shack. Trader? Bah! He knows nothing of trading. His goods are such stuff as a trader might have brought out here when you was a boy, Mr. Wooton."

"They was sold to me for trade goods back in Westport, Missoury," sighed Keene. "But I reckon the cross-blood is right when he says I ain't cut out for a trader. Still, I ain't nobody's fool, and I'll see what's in that buckskin bag before I pull my stakes."

"The bag is mine!" yelled Baptiste, edging a moccasined foot forward preliminary to springing for the revolver.

"You're going to lose a hoof in a second," warned Uncle Dick, resting one hand on the hammer of his rifle.

Baptiste drew back and Uncle Dick picked up the revolver. Then he informed him:

"You fellows will stand outside the door and watch me go and get the bag."

Keene willingly took up his position, but Baptiste cursed softly under his breath as he joined him. Uncle Dick walked down the creek a short distance to a raw

mound of earth and found the pouch. As he turned to retrace his steps slowly, he loosened the string and beheld a piece of paper. A single glance and he became tensely interested and deftly extracted the paper before reaching the two traders.

Seating himself between the men, he opened the bag and shook out a tiny gold cross and two nuggets. The latter were almost pure gold. Baptiste's eyes glittered wolfishly as they beheld the nuggets.

"Two chunks of gold and a piece of jewelry," murmered Keene. "Pretty good medicine for a white man to have, I reckon. How'll we divide it?"

Uncle Dick broke a twig into two pieces and directed:

"Man drawing the longest one has his pick of the nuggets. He'll probably choose the biggest one."

Exposing the ends of the pieces of twig, he extended them to Baptiste, who hesitated, then made his selection. As Keene held up his piece he disgustedly cried:

"It ain't losing the big nugget, but I hate to have that skunk beat me!"

"Both of you are pretty well paid for burying the man," consoled Uncle Dick. "Now I reckon I'll take this little gold cross as my share in stopping the waste of good ammunition. Any kick? If so, fix a fair value and I'll buy it."

Keene flushed, saying: "Keep it and welcome."

Baptiste took it between his fingers and examined it critically; then contemptuously announced:

"I make you a gift of it, Mr. Wooton."

"Very generous and noble-hearted of you, Baptiste,

seeing as how it's plated and worth about six bits," grinned Uncle Dick. "Now that the trading and the fight is all over I want to ask a question. Have either of you ever seen a woman, a white woman, round these parts?"

"A white woman!" yelped Keene, his eyes popping wide open. "Lordy! I ain't seen a white woman since I passed a wagon-train two months ago 'way up the trail. She was thin and yaller and was smoking a pipe. I reckon she'd look some handsome to me now, though."

Baptiste's reply to the unexpected query was not so spontaneous. He turned aside, collected his firearms and placed them on a shelf before curtly saying:

"No white women ever come to Muddy Creek. Sometimes squaws, but no whites."

"Did either of you ever hear of a white woman being seen anywhere along the Purgatory?" persisted Uncle Dick.

"Not me," readily answered Keene, but now his eyes were half closed.

Baptiste shook his head as if bored by the queries. Uncle Dick eyed them truculently, especially the half-breed. Turning to the latter, he said:

"You're a liar, Baptiste. Injuns come here. They tell you things. They come to the top of Raton Pass and tell me things. They're more free to talk with you than they are with me. The Arapahoes tell me a white woman has been seen riding alone along the Purgatory very recently. If they'd spill that much to me they'd told more to you because you're part Injun."

Passing over the slur on his veracity Baptiste shrugged his shoulders and calmly repeated:

"No white women come here. I've heard of none on the Purgatory. If your Arapahoes have seen one, they've told me nothing."

"Ever hear any talk about road-agents?" abruptly asked Uncle Dick.

"Why do you ask that?" queried Keene in a drawling voice.

"Just my bedeviling way of getting folks fussed up," growled Uncle Dick, stealing a glance at Baptiste. The breed's face was as devoid of expression as a wooden mask, but his fingers twitched nervously.

"Every one hears about road-agents these days," said Keene.

"Few folks come here except Indians to trade," slowly added Baptiste. "I don't remember them mentioning road-agents. Month ago a small scout of soldiers stopped here and 'Colorado Frank' said stages were being held up south of the Pass."

"None of the agents ever come here, eh?"

As Baptiste opened his mouth indignantly to explode, Uncle Dick shot in:

"They often stop at my place."

"No road-agents have ever come here," solemnly declared Baptiste.

"Reckon that's right," agreed Keene.

"I reckon you folks got another think coming," quietly declared Uncle Dick. "Boy Charlie, running-mate of Chuckle-Luck, has been here, and you two have talked with him."

"That's a——" choked Baptiste, but Uncle Dick reached for his throat and hissed:

"Don't you give me the lie, you half-Injun!"

As the breed fell back from the clawing hand Keene remonstrated:

"But that's coming it a little raw, Wooton. I don't know what men Baptiste has met, but I've never seen and talked with any Boy Charlie."

"Maybe I oughter explain that you not only talked with him, but you've buried him," qualified Uncle Dick.

Keene stared in amazement, then turned and glared at the mound of fresh earth.

"Meaning that?" he whispered, nodding toward the grave.

"Just that," murmured Uncle Dick. "You two been trying to shoot each other up over a hundred-odd dollars' worth of gold and didn't seem to know who'd furnished them."

"A five-thousand-dollar funeral!" gasped Keene.

"Then you do know a reward is offered for every one of them critters, dead or alive?" sharply asked Uncle Dick.

"I know. I took it for granted a reward was offered. It's usually five thousand a head," faltered Keene.

Baptiste, who had remained rigid during this brief exchange, now excitedly demanded:

"Do you mean, Mr. Wooton, that the man we buried is an outlaw and that five thousand is offered for him, dead or alive?"

"Just that," assured Uncle Dick. "You two dig

him up and cart him to the nearest fort or settlement and get your money. The notch in the top of his ear would identify him anywhere 'twixt hell and Santa Fé."

Keene shivered with disgust and mumbled: "I'm a poor slouch at trading, I reckon. I don't want any of that trade. Not for a million."

Baptiste said nothing, but his eyes glittered as they ranged toward the grave.

Uncle Dick rose, saying:

"Well, having stopped bloodshed, I 'low I'll be moving along. Better smoke a pipe together and bunk in one cabin. If I read the signs right there's going to be a heap of trouble before steam-engine tracks reach the upper waters of Smoky Hill."

"Wait a minute," begged Keene, who sat with hands clasped over one knee and head bowed in deep reflection. "It's like this: If I stay here I'll get so lonesome I shall either shoot up Baptiste, or else he'll pot me when I ain't looking. S'pose I go with you?"

"I never hankered to have company forced on me," regretted Uncle Dick. "I'll tell you what you do. Go up to the station and take time to decide what you'll do. When I get back I'll have a talk with you. Maybe you'd like to try prospecting along with Joe Peace. If so I'll grub-stake you if you need it."

"I won't if Baptiste will buy my goods."

"I'll buy the rum. Goods no good," was the breed's curt response.

"Pack your truck up to the station. If there's anything the Arapahoes want I'll dicker for it. Got a horse?" said Uncle Dick.

"Two mules," joyfully cried Keene. "I'll be there, Uncle Dick, waiting for you. I'm no good as a trader, but maybe I'll do better hunting gold. If your friend will take me as a partner I believe I'll do well. Come on, Baptiste, measure out the rum."

"Perhaps my friend will take you and perhaps he won't," warned Uncle Dick. "You're a tenderfoot at gold-hunting, I take it, and he'd scarcely want to share even with you. Still, he needs some one to cook and do squaw work while he hunts color. No harm for you two to talk it over. So long."

He walked back and procured his horse and, as he rode down the creek, he could hear the two men arguing violently over the purchase price of the trade liquor.

"Baptiste has dealings with the road-agents, and that grave will prove it. He won't open it for the reward," muttered the mountaineer. "Just how Keene stands will be shown when I have a talk with him at the station—that is, if he goes there."

Once out of sight of the two cabins he drew forth the piece of paper he had surreptitiously extracted from the buckskin bag and studied it exultingly. It was a rough facsimile of the sketch made by Mary June. Where hers had contained artistic merit, this effort, taken from the body of Boy Charlie, suggested only a working-plan—a crude map. Pains had been taken to include the lone pine, its stunted and distorted growth even being emphasized. These pains to identify the pine among innumerable similarly weathered ones proved that to be the key to the location. Only in one

particular was the map different from Miss Mary's sketch. The skeletons, which she had so bizarrely added to her composition, were wanting. In their place was a small cross. Beneath it were the figures fifty-six.

After gazing at the paper until every detail of the map was photographed on his mind, he secured it inside his shirt, swung aside and pursued a course that would strike the Purgatory below the mouth of the creek. And as he pressed forward he exclaimed in a pleased voice:

"Well, it shows the little girl wa'n't crazy when she drew the picter. There is such a place and it's up to me to find it. Once there I ought to pick up her trail and follow it till it fetches me plumb up to my own door."

Then he remembered the absence of any skeleton from the second drawing and his kindly eyes clouded.

"Maybe that Boy Charlie didn't know how to put in skeletons," he hopefully mused. "Anyway, there ain't any more sense in writing fifty-six against the cliff than there is in decorating it up with dead men's bones."

In planning the trip Uncle Dick had a major and minor purpose. His most important objective was the Purgatory. The girl must have been injured within a few miles, at the most, of the toll-gate. Her sketch had brought to his mind a recollection of the Purgatory where it ran between high walls. The two men who had brought her to the station had avoided scrutiny and returned the way they came. From the start he had tagged them as outlaws. The bullet fired

at him on the plateau was undoubtedly discharged by a road-agent. Could he identify any stretch of the Purgatory as being the original of the girl's sketch, he believed he would have one end of the tangled skein in his hand.

The visit to Baptiste's cabin had been included in his plans on the slim chance that he might surprise the trader into letting drop some bit of information that would corroborate his belief that the mysterious woman seen on the river was Miss Mary. Big Knife, the Arapaho, had so identified her. Uncle Dick was chary of placing full credence in an Indian's testimony, especially seeing that none of the Arapahoes had, according to their own testimony, succeeded in securing a close view of the woman.

Fate had dealt more kindly with his quest than he had ever hoped, when it was permitted that he should accidentally stumble upon the map. It was the same composition as the sketch. How the outlaw came to possess it was a mystery, but the circumstance furnished the second point of contact between the girl's life and the activities of the robbers. The other was the woman the passengers saw on Devil's Elbow. This line of thought led him back to contemplate the attempt on his life made near the mountain lake. Here he was hopelessly puzzled. He could account for it only by one of two theories: either he had been mistaken for some one else, or neither of the two men who had taken the girl to the station could have been present when the shot was fired.

"There wouldn't be any sense in their taking the

risk and the bother to fetch Miss Mary to me to cure and care for if they was willing to wipe me out on sight. If they wanted me to take care of her they'd naturally want me to live to keep on doing it. One of them had a notched ear—Boy Charlie. Some one drills him through and through and he rides to Baptiste's store and croaks. Wonder where he got that map?"

These baffling meditations filled his thoughts for several miles, and he had swung in close to the foot of a towering and detached butte when he was startled by the musical call of a bugle sounding retreat.

His first thought was that a party of soldiers were falling back before a superior force of Indians. Slipping his rifle from under his leg, he jumped to the ground. He pricked his ears and marveled that a bugle should sound retreat when there was never a single rifle shot to advertise an engagement—neither a shot nor a war-cry.

It was deathly quiet at the foot of the butte, and, as he stood with every nerve strained, he began to wonder if he had actually heard the call or had mistaken some bird-note for it. He found the enigma poignantly disturbing, as it almost smacked of the supernatural. He would have denied that he was superstitious, but it is seldom that one lives for thirty years among a people without absorbing something of its belief. The foundation of the religious life of an Indian is his belief in magic power. When something happens it is because some one has done something. When the cause is seemingly inexplicable, it is easily perceived by explaining it by magic.

While Uncle Dick would not go so far as to accept the mental attitude of his Arapaho friends, and attribute the bugle-notes to good or evil spirits dwelling among the buttes, he was profoundly disturbed that he should hear a bugle in a desolate and empty region where he knew there was no bugle.

Quitting the base of the butte, he slowly threaded his way among lesser masses of rock, muttering: "If any of Hancock's men are out this far what in Hen be they blowing a trumpet for? If they're falling back, what are they falling back from? And why don't I hear their horses? That bugle sounded derned near."

He cast a glance over his shoulder at the grim top of the butte. The silence continued and he made a brave attempt to make himself believe it had all been the work of his imagination.

"Any one would be crazy to go tooting a trumpet out here. There ain't no trumpet out here. I was just day-dreaming and thought I heard——"

The forceful ejaculation was accompanied by a startled jump and was caused by the mellow notes of a bugle sounding close at hand. This time it ordered the advance.

"Well, ding-bust me!" he weakly cried, leaning against his horse and mopping his face. "Seems that me and a trumpet are out here all alone."

Then, shaking himself alert and thrusting forward his stubborn jaw, he advanced rapidly through the broken rocks until the plain opened to view. The plain was empty; but, directly ahead and partly sheltered

by a low ridge of boulders, was a small encampment of Indians. He smiled in great relief, although there was still much to be explained. He could not understand why the camp should be so devoid of life, for he could make out no figures either lounging at rest or moving about.

The central lodge was larger than the others, and beside it stood an army ambulance. Looking more closely he discerned a team of mules up the bank, busily grazing. Then he understood and whispered:

"Kiowas!"

Slipping behind a small boulder, he flattened out on the ground and made an inventory of the situation. The fact that there were no scouts out evidenced a presumption of perfect security. It was the ambulance and the mules that stirred his drowsy recollections into identifying the band as being Kiowas. Now that he knew this he was in no wise surprised when an Indian wearing a major-general's full uniform appeared in the opening of the big lodge and lifted a bugle to his lips. The advance and the retreat were played with exquisite skill. Other calls followed, each fittingly given. At last the warrior lowered the bugle and lifted his head, and Uncle Dick obtained a square glimpse of the dark face. He stiffened and toyed with his rifle, whispering to himself:

"Satanta! The old devil! Hancock gave him that uniform last summer. Lord only knows where and when he stole the ambulance. Now what mischief is he planning?"

Satanta—White Bear—was the most dreaded of

the Kiowa chiefs. He combined a soldierly knowledge of strategy with the eloquence of the born orator. Army officers held his abilities in high esteem, despite his hostility to the whites. Many proclaimed him as rivaling Pontiac and Tecumseh in oratorical efforts. That he should be here, on the upper waters of the Purgatory, accompanied only by a small following while the center of interest for the plains tribes was along the Smoky Hill River, could be explained by Uncle Dick only by one theory. He was to hold an important conference with leaders of allied tribes and did not intend that the army officers should suspect his purpose.

As he watched the great chief, Uncle Dick knew he had solved a puzzle which two years before had fooled his friend, Kit Carson. Carson, as colonel of the First New Mexico Infantry, led a detachment of troops, augmented by Jicarilla Apaches and Utes, against the allied Kiowa, Comanche and Apache tribes on the South Canadian. The hostiles fought so fiercely that the famous Pathmaker was glad to retire, his two howitzers permitting him to save his troops.

During that battle, which lasted all day, Carson told Uncle Dick that some white man was with the Indians and was equipped with a cavalry bugle. The man, identified as a white man solely because of his proficiency with the bugle, echoed every call of Carson's bugler with the opposite call. When Carson's bugler blew advance, the bugler among the Indians would at once sound retreat. All of this was more or less confusing to the troops. Carson had insisted it was a

white man, masquerading as an Indian; that only a white man, familiar with army post life, could play the bugle so famously. Uncle Dick, however, knew Satanta was present at the fight on the South Canadian, and what he had now witnessed convinced him that the "white man" was no other than Satanta himself.

The mountaineer tugged at his long locks and frowned over the problem in his path. He was impatient to withdraw from the neighborhood of the camp and continue his search into the history of the girl. Opposed to this was his greater sense of duty, urging him to learn the wily savage's plans. To enter the camp would be to invite acute personal danger. But it was not the thought of peril that caused him to hesitate, as he had thrived on dangers since he was nineteen years old.

But there was Mary June at the top of Raton Pass, nameless, homeless except as he gave her a home, and helpless for want of memory. He had assumed the responsibility of acting her protector, yet he realized that the welfare of one person should not count when it came to preventing the horrors of a general uprising, and he knew that Satanta's presence on the lonely Purgatory could mean only plans for a wholesale massacre.

He studied the camp moodily, counted the ponies and concluded no emissaries from the Sioux, Cheyenne or other tribes had arrived as yet. He scanned the north and east, where he had an extended view of the open country, and discovered no sign of approaching horsemen.

"Satanta'll treat me all right if he reckons I don't suspect anything," he mused. "But if any other redskins come in while I'm with him he's liable to stop my talking. Well, I s'pose some one's got to find out what the slippery cuss is up to, and Uncle Dick seems to be elected for the job."

Crawling back to his horse, he mounted and rode with a clatter over the soilless ledge. By the time he came in sight of the camp the lounging braves were erect and grasping their weapons. Satanta, an imposing figure of a man, erect and graceful in his bearing, still stood before his lodge, one hand resting the bugle on his hip, the other clasping a heavy Colt's revolver.

Uncle Dick threw up his right hand and called out:

"Settainte! Cut-Hand, friend of the Arapahoes, comes to smoke with you."

The chief remained immovable, his dark face impassive. Then suddenly he simulated gladness and, putting up his revolver, advanced to meet his guest. As he shook hands and smiled, however, his gaze, Uncle Dick noted, remained focused on the big butte to see if others lurked there in hiding.

"Heard your music, Settainte," cordially said Uncle Dick, using the correct Kiowa form of the name rather than the Anglicized version. Dismounting and still retaining the chief's hand, he warmly assured him:

"I forget that I am tired and have traveled far, now that I see you."

"Cut-Hand is welcome," Satanta heartily responded, his black eyes continuing to flicker from the moun-

taineer to the butte. "Let his friends come in. Settainte loves the white men."

"I am alone. I was riding to the Purgatory when I heard your music."

"You thought the soldiers were here and you found the Kiowas?" was the suspicious query.

"No, no. The soldiers do not blow the retreat."

"They did the winter Black War-Bonnet Top died," grimly reminded Satanta, referring to the fight with Carson on the South Canadian. "The soldiers took our first village, then we pushed them back. We fired the grass and crept near them in the smoke. Lean Bear carried the medicine-lance of the Tonkonko and sang the war-song of his order as he advanced. Stumbling Bear killed a soldier."

The chief could not resist this bit of boasting.

"Colonel Carson said you had a white man with you to blow the bugle," said Uncle Dick.

Satanta placed the instrument to his lips and ran through several calls, then proudly replied:

"I was the man. It was a good fight. We saved all our horses and kept all our white prisoners. If they had not had their big guns, we should have killed all the white men."

"But now you are at peace with the whites you are glad you did not kill them," said Uncle Dick.

"I am glad," softly said Satanta, bowing his head to conceal the great hate burning in his eyes. "I love the white man, but I have eaten wild meat all my life and do not like his corn rations—they make my teeth hurt."

"You are not on the trail to Old-Man-of-the-Thunder?"

"We have promised Colonel Leavenworth to sign a treaty with the Great White Father at Medicine-Lodge Creek when the leaves fall. Then we'll take the white man's path. Now I follow some Utes who stole our horses. Where does Cut-Hand ride?"

"To the Purgatory. I am glad I found you. It is good medicine for me, for you can help me. You can tell me something."

"The friend of Little Raven of the Arapahoes asks; Settainte, the White Bear, gives," was the laconic reply.

The chief turned back to the lodge and stood aside for Wooton to enter.

Uncle Dick had been quick to notice the absence of any women. Satanta himself unrolled the strip of carpet for the mountaineer to sit on, a display he made only when wishing to honor a guest. Next he produced some boards, three feet by two, decorated round the edges with brass tacks, arranged them before Uncle Dick and called out a command. An aged Indian soon appeared with a kettle of deer-meat and a smoking buffalo-hump and placed them on the improvised table. The mountaineer ate heartily. When he had finished Satanta lighted a pipe and, after a whiff, passed it to his guest. This ceremony completed, he said:

"Cut-Hand needs help?"

Uncle Dick nodded. Pulling back a corner of the carpet, he drew a rough map on the well-trodden earth, explaining it as he worked, by saying:

"These cañon walls are very high. The river runs swift as a deer between them. Here is a twisted pine, made sick by bad medicine, yet living. Do you know such a place on the Purgatory?"

Satanta studied the earth-map through half-closed eyes; then, lifting his head, he answered:

"I know much of the river. I never saw a place like that."

"Then there isn't any such place on the Purgatory," sighed Uncle Dick, convinced that the chief was lying to him. "I forgot to put in here these little marks. They're dead men's bones—ribs of men long dead."

The hand holding the long pipe gave a convulsive jerk. For a moment Uncle Dick believed he saw fear shining through as brave eyes as could be found on the plains.

"Now you remember it?" pressed Uncle Dick.

"No. Dead men's bones are sometimes bad medicine. I can not help you. There is no such place on the river."

"I hoped you could help. I must be going."

"Wait!" grunted Satanta, rising and stepping to the opening and murmuring some words to a young buck. Turning back, he explained: "I love the white men. Cut-Hand is my brother. I wish to help him. One of my men who is now hunting a buffalo cow knows the river better than any other Kiowa. I have sent for him. He may know what Settainte does not know."

Uncle Dick thanked him, lighted his pipe and composed himself to wait. Satanta asked:

"You look for gold?"

The mountaineer darted a quick glance at the lowering face and demanded:

"Why do you ask that, White Bear? You know I am too old to hunt for gold. When life is young, in the Great Bud Moon, one hunts for gold and women, but not in the Real Goose Moon. I only ask to live in peace on top of the mountains."

Satanta tersely observed:

"White men want gold all the time. It is gold that brings them into the Indians' land to scare and kill the buffalo."

With his thoughts flashing back to the two nuggets found on Boy Charlie's dead body, Uncle Dick persisted: "You speak of gold because we have spoken of dead men's bones. Why?"

"Gold and dead men are always found together," replied the chief, his face devoid of expression. "If the white men would take all the gold in our country and then go away, we should hold many sun-dances."

"But there is no gold on the Purgatory."

"Then there will be no dead men there," added the chief.

"But the Arapahoes say there is a white medicine-woman who rides along the Purgatory," abruptly informed Uncle Dick.

Again the flicker of fear, perhaps of the supernatural, pricked through the dark eyes.

"The Arapahoes tell stories to frighten their children and then believe them themselves. How could a white woman live alone on the river?"

"I did not say she lived alone. There may be white men with her."

"There are no white men on the Purgatory except those who pass back and forth hunting gold."

"Then she may live there alone because she is a medicine-woman."

Satanta refused to comment on this possibility.

For nearly an hour the two sat opposite each other in silence. Uncle Dick's long experience told him he was a prisoner, and that should he attempt to leave the lodge he would be detained by force if necessary. At last the young buck swirled up to the lodge, his pony in a lather, and, as Satanta glided to the opening, called out:

"There is no sign of our man. He has gone very far after the cow."

Turning to Uncle Dick the chief said:

"You hear? Our man can not be found. But I want to help Cut-Hand, and I will send some of my men to the river and tell them what to look for; then I will send word to the top of the mountain so my friend can know."

"That would slow up your chase of the horse-stealing Utes. I can soon ride to the river and look for myself," protested Uncle Dick.

"One who lives in the Real Goose Moon should not ride off alone to such places," advised Satanta. "If my men took you for a gold-hunter they might forget my orders and hurt you."

Uncle Dick realized that the chief, for some reason, was threatening him with death if he pushed on.

"I will go back to Raton Pass. It is true I am growing old. I am very tired. I shall have gifts for any Kiowas who bring me word."

With that he mounted and rode toward the butte, while a small band of braves made a pretense of galloping toward the river. Never once did he glance back at the camp, although he would not have been surprised had an arrow or a bullet whipped after him, once he was outside the zone made safe by laws of hospitality. Not until he had turned a shoulder of the butte did he allow himself to believe that he was actually free to go back to the pass.

"The lying devil!" he grumbled, halting and dismounting. "Sent for one of his men who knew the river? Bah! He was afraid some of the leaders from the other tribes were about to come into camp and, before deciding whether to kill me or turn me loose, he sent a buck to make sure no Dakotas were along the sky-line. If any had shown up they'd had my hair off by now. Wouldn't let me go on to the river for fear I'd meet some of the visiting chiefs.

"And the red devil did recognize the picter. The bones nearly jolted him into dropping something. He lied when he said the picter didn't mean any place on the Purgatory. The place is there and I'm going to look it over, even if the whole Kiowa nation says I can't—then I'll go back to Mary June."

He rode briskly for an hour, then turned into a pocket in the buttes and ascended a broken wall until he could reconnoiter his back trail. Two Indians on ponies were cantering over the rough ground, pausing

to pick up his trail in the extensive areas of dead moss, circling ledges when at fault. Satanta had taken no chances on the mountaineer's doubling back.

Uncle Dick had taken no pains to conceal his trail, and wherever the soil permitted his horse's hoofs to register, the signs were plenty and plain enough. There was a likelihood that his plan of stealing by the camp and gaining the river might be balked; it all depended on the next few minutes. If the Indians kept on they would find where he entered the pocket and would guess his true purpose. Just what Satanta had ordered to be done in such an event was not hard to imagine.

Uncle Dick slipped down the wall to his horse and saw to it his weapons were ready. The minutes passed and the warriors did not appear. Clambering back up the wall, he could detect no signs of them.

He knew he would save time by waiting until night, when he could swing wide of the camp and take to the open country and travel fast. The hours lagged, but with the red man's adamant patience he bided, revolving thoughts of Mary June who had lost herself. This led him to speculate on the road-agents and their mysterious leader, known as Gentleman Ralph.

Repeatedly and always vainly he essayed to determine how the outlaws came to be linked to the girl's sad story. Boy Charlie, one of the two to bring her to the station, had passed on. Uncle Dick made a shrewd guess that Boy Charlie's companion that night had been the notorious Chuckle-Luck. He wondered if Chuckle-Luck had fired the fatal shot and, if so, why? What had they quarreled about? Not the girl,

for they had shoved the responsibility of her care on to honest shoulders.

"Dead man's bones and gold are bad medicine," Satanta had said. Well, Boy Charlie was dead and his nuggets divided between the traders. Lastly, Satanta's avowal that he purposed to sign a peace treaty at Medicine-Lodge Creek rang falsely, considering his secret mission in the shadow of Raton Range. Satanta had said he would send warriors to the Purgatory, ostensibly to seek the information Uncle Dick required. The mountaineer had seen the men depart. He had no doubt but what they did proceed to the river, but with instructions to kill any white man found loitering there. With the return of the two trackers the chief would be satisfied that the toll-gate keeper had returned home, and the warriors, on reaching the river and finding no signs, would not tarry.

Night came, with only starlight to help or hinder him. Sacrificing a blanket, he muffled his horse's hoofs and made his way back to the Indian camp, halting in the black shadows of the giant butte. Leaving his animal, and armed only with his revolver and knife, he proceeded to the edge of the camp and hid behind a rock. A fire burned brightly in front of the central lodge.

After an hour's waiting several warriors galloped up and, by their brief exchange of words with the camp guard, Uncle Dick identified them as the men dispatched to the river. Satanta, aroused by the noise, appeared in view for a moment, then retired into the lodge.

Uncle Dick began crawling away, eager to complete his detour, and gain the river, when a thin call out on the plains brought him back to the rock. The call was repeated and immediately caused much bustling in the camp.

"Kiowa scout coming back with visitors—the Injuns that old Satanta has been waiting for."

More fuel was heaped on the fire. The voice from the plains grew louder, and Uncle Dick, from his recumbent position, could catch the jarring thud of several horses racing in his direction. The horsemen burst from the darkness as if breaking through a curtain, some twenty of them, and Satanta in person hastened to welcome them, even before they could dismount. The light from the brilliant fire aided Uncle Dick none in identifying the new guests, as each was muffled from head to moccasin in a blanket.

The first of the newcomers to leap from his horse threw back the hood of his blanket enough to reveal in his black hair a feather tipped with red and deeply notched near the top, signifying he had scalped an enemy and cut his throat. This manner of advertising his prowess indicated he was a Dakota. Still holding his blanket close, he made some rapid signs with the fingers of one hand. Uncle Dick even ventured to lift his head clear of the rock in an effort to catch this sign language, but another warrior maneuvered his pony so as to mask the nimble fingers.

With evident enthusiasm Satanta placed his closed hand on the left side of his head and raked the thumb across the forehead to the right and away from the

head. Then he dropped the hand with fingers extended, a short distance before the right of the body, and brought it inward, quickly thrust it forward as if to shake hands, lifted two fingers, closed the hand except for the two extended fingers and passed it from right to left in a downward curve. Finally he held his two clenched fists before his breast, palms down, and, with a dramatic flourish, swept them outward and downward.

With a shiver Uncle Dick mechanically interpreted this sign talk in a loud whisper:

"Two years ago the white people promised to be friends with us but they lied. That's all."

The ponies were turned out to graze and Satanta ushered his guests inside his lodge.

"The old devil meant the Little Arkansas Treaty," mumbled Uncle Dick. "The chap with the notched feather was a Dakota. Lord! If the Dakotas mix up in it there'll be some real trouble. If Satanta gives the pipe, that means the Comanches and Apaches are with him as a matter of course, but if the Dakotas and Cheyennes join hands in the game it'll take more'n Hancock's men to hold them. Colonel Leavenworth is the man to make the Kiowas back up. Satanta don't intend to go to Medicine-Lodge Creek for any treaty. Leavenworth must know about this and get after him. He can do more with the Kiowas than a whole army can do. Sorry, Miss Mary, but your business must wait just a little bit till I can send a talk to the colonel."

Suddenly his meditations were broken by the impact of a heavy body dropping on his back. He rolled

aside and clutched a throat just as a yell of discovery sounded from his assailant's lips. Instantly the camp was in commotion. Uncle Dick's fingers dug deeper to prevent a second outcry. His assailant, gasping for breath, endeavored to use his knife, then concentrated his efforts in tearing at the implacable fingers. In the camp the warriors were rushing madly about, seeking the source of the outcry. Finally one young buck, venturing toward the rocks at random, caught the sound of threshing bodies and yelled shrilly. At once he had the full pack running behind him. With a supreme effort Uncle Dick gathered his knees, straightened his legs and pushed with his hands at the same time. Then he glided away in the darkness, leaving the half-strangled scout to explain to the enraged Satanta.

CHAPTER IV

GENTLEMAN RALPH PLAYS A CARD

THE attack in the darkness necessitated a change in Uncle Dick's plans. With the Kiowa warriors swarming to their badly choked brother and learning from him that a white man had been acting the spy, the mountaineer knew Satanta would exert every energy to overhaul him and still his tongue. Whereas he had intended to abandon the trip to the Purgatory and return with all haste to the toll-house and send a messenger to Colonel Leavenworth, he now found himself compelled to make for the river in order to escape the red pack. Satanta would assume that the quarry would make straight for Raton Pass and the chief, therefore, would endeavor to cut him off.

Believing this, Uncle Dick rode furiously toward the range, then turned at right angles and cut across the plains. The muffled hoofs of his mount saved him from betraying his position to his pursuers and, once on the prairie, he slowed down and cautiously began an encircling movement.

The stars and the fire from the camp gave him his direction. Occasionally faint yells from along the buttes reached his ears, but, so far as he could detect,

no guards had been thrown out on the plains. When the east began to show color he felt he was safe from discovery unless Satanta should suspect his ruse and send men to the river. Within pistol-shot of the headwaters of the Purgatory he hobbled his horse and allowed the animal to graze, and himself spread a blanket, thinking to snatch a few hours of sleep.

He was a considerable distance above the cañon through which the river tumbled for many miles. This isolation tended to eliminate any temptation to postpone sending a message to Colonel Leavenworth while he tarried to explore the cañon. No, he would rest a bit, not being so young as when he rode for nights and days and slept in the saddle, and then he would make for home and plan a return trip.

Before seeking rest, however, it was necessary to scout the immediate vicinity. This he did, not because he feared the presence of Indians, but to make sure no lawless whites were in the neighborhood. If any number of road-agents were working under one leader their logical retreat must be somewhere on the Purgatory. His knowledge of the terrain forced this conviction upon him. Striking from the river, the bandits had access to Trinidad, could raid the trail as far north as Hole in the Prairie, or dash down into northern New Mexico by way of Raton Pass.

As Uncle Dick stole from the pocket he pondered frowningly over the frequent use made of the toll-road by the robbers. So long as the hold-ups had been haphazard, the work of a few men working independently of one another, he had not felt called upon to function

for the authorities of the Overland Company, but, if system were being applied to the nefarious work, the use of his road became a personal affront. For him to face a radical evil, one that did not wreck itself quickly, demanded an immediate quest for a preventive.

A cure, as he visioned it, could be simply and quickly applied. It would require a posse of fearless men stationed at the top of the pass under the leadership of some such resolute spirit as Joe Peace. With such a weapon, law and order could sweep from its high perch and strike above or below the pass. By seizing all suspects arriving at the station, the strength of the gang would be whittled down. By breaking their short line of communication with New Mexico, the posse would soon break the spirit of the band. Extermination would follow, and the mountains would be cleansed.

Such a course would mean open war between him and the outlaws, but the prospect of violence never deterred Uncle Dick from taking a short-cut. On returning to the station he would forward a message to Leavenworth, arrange for the posse and then come back to the Purgatory on the girl's business.

"Red or white or the devil! Come and help me!" suddenly called a faint voice from behind a big boulder.

With the alertness of early manhood Uncle Dick dropped to one knee and cocked his rifle. Death-traps were often disguised under frantic appeals for aid.

"I heard you. I know you're there. Help, for the love of God!" gasped the voice.

"Toss your guns over the rock," commanded Uncle Dick.

There sounded a deep groan, and something clattered against the top of the boulder and fell back. The voice faintly confessed:

"Too weak—shot to pieces by Charlie, damn him!"

Convinced that some one was lying in the last extremity just beyond the boulder, yet unwilling to assume any unnecessary risk, Uncle Dick placed his hat on the end of his rifle and pushed it round the rock with his left hand, at the same time thrusting his head and a revolver round the other side. One glimpse of the man flat on his back, his face livid from sun and thirst, brought Uncle Dick to his feet. The heavy revolver the man had attempted to throw over the rock was mute evidence of the unfortunate's willingness to disarm himself.

Uncle Dick recovered his hat and ran to the river, the man calling out for him to come back and not to desert him. Filling the hat with water, the mountaineer hastened to the sufferer and permitted him to drink. The man swallowed with difficulty and greedily caught the rim of the hat in his teeth when Uncle Dick would have removed it. He seemed unable to get enough. Not until after the third trip did he give a sigh of content. His face was baked by the heat, and the red stains on his flannel shirt indicated the serious nature of his wounds. Procuring more water, Uncle Dick bathed the swollen visage and examined the wound. It required only a superficial investigation to tell him the man was at the opening of the Great Pass.

"You're a white man, pard," whispered the dying one. "I've got mine. I know I've got to cash in.

Serves me just right for yoking up with such cattle."

"You said Charlie did for you. Did you mean Boy Charlie?" murmured Uncle Dick.

"Boy Charlie—boy devil; curse him!" spat out the man, his cracked lips snarling. "Got me to come here. Promised me a quick fortune—then done for me."

"You're an agent?" queried Uncle Dick, gently bathing the caked blood from the wound.

"Have I got any chance?" countered the man.

"No chance," softly replied Uncle Dick, strangely sorry that the man must die, whereas a few minutes before he had planned a wholesale destruction of the gang. "Even if you had had help the first thing, there'd hardly been a chance for you. You're done for, my man."

"I've known it ever since I was plugged, yet I sort o' hoped I'd win through on account of Isobel. If I knew about the girl I'd feel easier."

"Whose girl?" asked Uncle Dick, his eyes filling with sympathy as he anticipated the answer.

"Mine, now her father's dead—my niece—best girl in the world. Stranger, ain't it hell for a man to have the chance to take care of a girl and then go wrong? I reckoned I could clean up a pile and leave her rich—that she'd never know. I saw only some easy gold in it—no bloodshed, just taking from them that had. Every one seemed to be doing it one way or t'other—Injuns taking everything they could lay paws on to—white men robbing the Injuns—every one holding up some one else. Didn't seem so worse with Boy Charlie and Chuckle-Luck telling it. Then there was the boss.

He could really talk a angel into using two guns."

"The boss? Ralph, eh? Who is he? Where is he?" cried Uncle Dick.

The man gave a ghastly smile and tried to shake his head.

"He's played square with me, far as I know. Doesn't even know I had the girl along."

"Isobel, you called her. Where is she?" demanded Uncle Dick, his curiosity concerning the bandit leader falling behind his desire to learn about the girl.

The man groaned and his face wrinkled in anguish.

"God help her! I don't know. That's what makes dying hard. It ain't what I must meet, but what I'm leaving behind that hurts. I never planned it this way. I'd planned to take her East and locate her. She was never to know. Then the boss sent word I was to help in one job to prove I was square and wouldn't blow when I struck Missouri. The boss didn't know I had her along. I made her believe the gang was traders, sticking together because they were scared of Injuns. I hid her up in a safe place and went through with the job—west-bound stage."

He halted and coughed convulsively.

"And then?" prompted Uncle Dick, wiping the man's lips and bending lower.

"After the hold-up, Chuckle-Luck and Charlie told me she'd been thrown from her hoss and hurt—that they'd rushed her off where she could be took care of. I was crazy to follow her, but they wouldn't tell me where they took her. Said it would mean capture and death for me. Promised to take me to her in a day or

so when it was safe. I rode alone back to the river where I'd left her and found the buckskin bag she carried her gold cross in. She'd picked up two nuggets, almost pure gold, and dropped them into the bag. I didn't have time to look for the spot where she'd found them, but I made a map. The place must be somewhere between the twisted pine and the hole under the cliff—fifty-six paces between the two. Like a fool I showed the nuggets to Chuckle-Luck and Charlie. They acted like madmen. I pretended I couldn't tell where I found the bag, but that I would know the spot if I should see it again."

He licked his dry lips and rolled his eyes toward the river. Uncle Dick brought water, and, after drinking, the dying man continued.

"She never guessed the truth. She believed they was traders hiding from the Injuns. How she ever come to quit the place and fall from her horse I don't know. After I'd told Chuckle-Luck and Charlie about the nuggets, I got afraid of the way they acted. They promised to fetch the girl to me if I wouldn't tell the rest of the gang about the nuggets. That was when we was alone together—right in this spot. I grew more scared on account of the girl. They're bad—worse'n me.

"Chuckle-Luck talked with Charlie one side, then rode off, after saying he was going to fetch Isobel. Charlie then let on he could find the place without the girl. He planned to cover the ground she'd been over after she quit the hole in the cliff. I told him he couldn't do it, that even Isobel didn't know where she'd been.

I wanted him to think that finding the place all depended on me and that I wouldn't tell anything if they tried anything crooked with me or the girl.

"Then he come out flat-footed and said Chuckle-Luck was up to mischief, that we was old friends and could play the game just by ourselves. He'd known me quite a spell, and I think he meant it when he said it. Then I made the mistake of striking hands on the bargain and, because I believed him, I showed him the map I'd hid in the pouch. If ever you see a tall man with a notched left ear, plug him on sight. He's a road-agent; kill him for that. He's a low-down cowardly scum and he dropped me without giving me a show. Kill him for that. I managed to fire once when he rode away but missed him."

"You didn't miss him. He's dead. I've just come from where he's buried on Muddy Crick—drilled from side to side," gravely corrected Uncle Dick.

The dying man heard this incredulously. Uncle Dick nodded emphatically.

"Dead? Charlie pegged out ahead of me? Dead by my lead?" choked the outlaw, trying to lift his head. "Damn me, but that's rich! If it wa'n't for Isobel I'd die happy, but not knowing where she is——"

"She's all right. She was left with me," broke in Uncle Dick. "I'm Dick Wooton, keeper of the toll-gate in Raton Pass. She was left with me. I will take good care of her."

"Uncle Dick Wooton! They talk about you—Sante Fé," gasped the outlaw, feebly pressing the mountaineer's hand. "Everything seems to be about right."

An ashen pallor began showing about his lips. With the pleased, amazed expression frozen on his face, he stared up into Uncle Dick's pitying countenance.

Uncle Dick ran and brought water, but the outlaw could not swallow.

"The girl Isobel! What is her name—her real name? She is safe."

The road-agent rallied for a few moments.

"She shall never know this—my being a road-agent?" he whispered.

Uncle Dick in his mind pictured the girl riding out on Devil's Elbow, suddenly startled by the scene of the hold-up in the road below. He pictured her discovering the grim truth as she recognized some of the bandits, heretofore honest traders in her estimation. Possibly she had identified her uncle as one of the band. Then followed the mad gallop to get away from it all and her collapse in the road as she sought to get clear of the pass. Nevertheless he assured the dying man.

"She shall never know you were not honest traders. I will say you were killed by Indians—anything but the truth. Her name?"

"Why the name she give you, of course," painfully replied the outlaw, his eyes growing puzzled.

Uncle Dick hurriedly explained how the girl had lost her memory and could not identify herself, but when he had finished he saw the man had heard nothing.

In vain he endeavored to arouse him, but the stolid indifference of death was deadening the ears and stilling the tongue. Then, as the mountaineer gave up all hope, the set eyes lighted with intelligence, the lips sought to

frame some speech, the gaze grew bright. Uncle Dick waited, but the flash of life was only the brilliance of delirium. The swollen lips were mumbling:

"No place for Isobel—dead men's bones. She mustn't see them. Fifty-six paces down-stream from the pine. Just one or two good hauls, then for the East. Gentleman Ralph gives the order. All ready, boys! Here comes the stage. Chuckle-Luck's to cover the driver. Charlie 'n' me 's to get the box. Hands up!"

Death sounded the rattle in the bronzed throat. The harsh lines in the livid face were smoothed out. The fixed eyes were staring into the blue sky, and "Isobel Some One's" wayward uncle had pulled off his last hold-up. With a sigh for the blasted life and his disappointed hopes, Uncle Dick closed the unseeing orbs, brought scraggly boughs, covered the body and built a cairn over it.

Withdrawing to the pocket in the rocks, Uncle Dick sat down on the blanket and took some food from his saddle-bag. Between mouthfuls he summed up.

"Missed on learning the one thing I wanted—her name. But that oughter be easily picked up in Santa Fé. Do I want to pick it up? She mustn't know the truth if her mem'ry fails to come back. Poor child! If she ever does remember, she'll know all. Till she does remember, she is to be the only survivor of a east-bound party attacked by Injuns. We'll let it go at that.

"Then there's the gold. The place is somewhere in the cañon—fifty-six paces beyond the pine as you go down-stream. That's hers by right of discovery. She

shall have it. First name is Isobel, but, if she doesn't remember, she shall remain Mary. Better change it to Mary Wooton; then it'll seem like I had more of a claim on her."

He had finished eating and was contemplating the advisability of taking a nap, when he suddenly recalled the dead man's statement concerning Chuckle-Luck's departure to bring back the girl. Leaping to his feet, he threw the saddle on to his horse, mounted and galloped toward Raton Range.

"That scum ahead of me," he groaned, "and me mooning round and thinking of taking a snooze when I'd been told that cuss was gunning for the girl in hopes of learning her secret! Reckon I'm growing old, all right. Of course he'll try to steal her. Who the hell is their boss? They're organized, no mistake about that. Gentleman Ralph is the leader, but he wasn't with them when Turkey Bill's coach was held up. Wonder if any of them saw her on Devil's Elbow watching the performance? She must have seen her uncle. That was the shock that spoiled the girl's mem'ry and clogged her brain. Reckon that army surgeon savvied it right all the way through."

As he dismounted at the toll-gate and a Mexican raised it, the mountaineer hastened to the cook-house. Big Knife, the Arapaho Indian, was sprawled in the doorway enjoying a pipe. Uncle Dick sniffed at the blue smoke and identified the aroma as that of his private stock.

"Big Knife likes the white man's tobacco," grimly remarked Uncle Dick.

"Big Knife likes the white man's tobacco and the white man's guns," calmly responded the Indian.

"You have watched over the medicine-woman?"

"She has not moved from the house without an Arapaho at her heels."

"Has any stranger come while I've been away?"

"One white man in there." He nodded toward the station-house. "Big Knife does not like him."

"Why?"

Big Knife puffed his pipe in silence, his small eyes half closed. Realizing he might question him indefinitely without attracting a particle of attention, Uncle Dick grunted in disgust and turned back to a window opening into the eating-room. A glance and a whimsical smile puckered his lips. Joe Peace and Sam Keene sat on the long settee with the girl between them, each striving to hold her attention. The fat face of the Quail showed at the door of the girl's room.

As Uncle Dick looked on, the squaw advanced a step into the room. The girl promptly rose, and, with a smile and a duck of her pretty head to the two men, ran to the Arapaho woman, who drew her into the room and closed the door. Without glancing at Keene, Peace rose and stalked to the fireplace, leaning his arm on the stone shelf.

Returning to the cook-house, Uncle Dick found the stub of a pencil and a sheet of paper. He scrawled a note to Colonel Leavenworth in which he expressed his fears regarding Satanta's sincerity in promising to sign a peace treaty on Medicine-Lodge Creek. He briefly detailed what had happened at the Kiowa camp and

urged that pressure be brought to bear on Satanta. Addressing this, he returned to Big Knife and demanded:

"What Arapaho man here at the station is swift?"

Big Knife removed his pipe and whistled shrilly. A slim young buck with an intelligent face came round the end of the cook-house, surreptitiously wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Hell! They'll eat me clean off the mountain," growled Uncle Dick. Then he spoke in Arapaho: "You are Gray Wolf? You run like the wind?"

"I am Gray Wolf. I run when I am in a hurry. When I have plenty of time, my white father, I ride my pony."

"You will take this talking paper. It is for Colonel Leavenworth. You will take it to Fort Dodge unless you overtake soldiers riding east, then give it to them. The paper says it is from me. Any of Hancock's soldiers will send it on. If you overtake no soldiers riding to the fort, you will keep on and hand it to Major Douglas at Dodge. Take a good horse from the corral. When you come back I will have presents for you, but remember this talking paper must get through."

"Gray Wolf will ride the horse to death—then run. The talking paper shall go through," assured the young buck, taking the message and putting it in a pouch.

With this business off his mind, Uncle Dick turned to Big Knife and asked:

"You do not like the new white man?"

Speaking through his teeth and without bothering to remove the pipe, the Arapaho answered:

"The man Peace will kill him."

Only his eyes rolling toward the station suggested the need of interference on Uncle Dick's part.

Uncle Dick sprang to the rear door, and as his hand touched the latch-string, he heard Peace crying out:

"You're too damned willing to get acquainted. Can't you understand I don't like you? I don't like your face, your ways, or your gall in putting yourself ahead of the procession."

"I weep," replied a solemn voice.

"You'll do worse than that if you cross my trail again with any of your funny business," was the hot retort.

"I shiver."

In a burst of rage Peace hoarsely warned:

"See here, stranger, you've already blatted out that you're from the East. I take it you don't savvy our ways out here. We don't like to have men drop in on us and make themselves too much at home."

"Meaning this is your home, I reckon," drawled Keene.

"I'm not talking about your way of taking up living-quarters here. That's Uncle Dick's business to settle when he gets back. But you're too quick in getting acquainted with our women."

"Woman," gently corrected Keene. "I've paid no attention to the Indian lady."

"The young white woman who lives here," slowly amended Peace, his voice as sharp as a knife-blade. "It may be the proper thing back East, but it doesn't go here."

"Then a man from the East can't ever get acquainted with a woman out here?" remarked Keene.

"He can at least wait till we find out something about him," Peace sternly shot back.

"I don't see how you have anything to say so long as the young lady doesn't object," carelessly retorted Keene. "I've paid her no attention beyond common civilities."

"Damn your civilities! You offer them too freely. They're not wanted. This top of the pass ain't big enough for the two of us. Understand that? And I'm not reckoning on moving on. I got here first."

Speaking slowly Keene replied:

"I fail to see as how it's any of your business if I talk to the young lady, so long as she doesn't kick. If you're her brother, or husband, or her husband-to-be, I'll listen to your yapping real polite-like, but so long as you ain't figgering in any of those capacities you can go to hell with your warnings and fault-finding."

Uncle Dick heard the settee scrape back and he opened the door just as Peace, snarling in anger, leaped toward Keene, a long knife flashing from his boot-leg. With a quick sweep of his long arm Keene brought the settee between them, thus gaining a second of time—enough to reach his knife in the belt he had hung on the wall. Before the blades could clash Uncle Dick was inside the door commanding:

"Put them knives up! The last man to obey never enters this station again."

The two weapons disappeared like magic. Peace turned back to the fireplace, his handsome face con-

vulsed with shame and rage. Keene looked at him vacuously, then faced Uncle Dick, his eyes glistening with pleasure.

"Welcome to your home, and I'm sure mighty glad to see you," he greeted.

"What the hell does this knife-play mean?" sternly demanded Uncle Dick, striding between the two and glancing balefully from one to the other.

"Mr. Peace 'lowed I hadn't any call to talk with Miss Mary," Keene answered.

"He makes himself too promiscu's, Uncle Dick," growled Peace. "The girl can't move but what he's at her heels."

"She had to say only a word to send me about my business," protested Keene.

"She isn't to be put to that bother," warned Uncle Dick, beginning to understand Big Knife's reason for disliking the newcomer. "I said if you came here I'd buy your junk for my Arapahoes. I didn't expect that at the first shot out of the gun you'd act as if you'd always lived here."

Somewhat abashed, Keene tried to defend himself.

"I didn't mean any harm. Peace talked to her, and I didn't see why I couldn't, if she didn't mind. For a derned long time I've been where I couldn't speak to a white woman. Maybe I was too hungry to talk to her, but she didn't seem to lay it up against me."

"Sit down," said Uncle Dick, now speaking softly, his ire vanishing. "Joe, you come over here. No use to let the girl know what we're bleating about. Now both of you listen. Miss Mary's my daughter. Any

man caught trying to make up to her, unless she comes to me and says she wants him to, is going to git heavily freighted with lead.

"Joe, I've known you for quite a few months and you're always welcome, but no love-making just yet. Keene, I don't know you from the underside of a bull buffalo-hide, but I asked you here. I'm a peaceable man, but you both hark to my words or something besides Raton Crick water'll run down the pass. That poor girl's been desperate hurt. Even now her head bothers her. You two he-critters keep your distance and speak only when she speaks to you, or something will drop that you won't hear when it hits. I've spoken. Now we'll eat."

In silence the two joined him at the table. He ate voraciously but they merely played with the food. At the end of the meal Uncle Dick lighted his pipe and his face took on a benign expression as he observed:

"The air round here seems to be melancholy and funeral-like. S'pose we have a new deal with every one friendly and sensible? I ain't blaming young blood for warming up to a pretty girl. That's human natur', but it peeves me when a man tries to shine up to a girl who's lost her mem'ry, who hasn't any father."

"Hasn't any father?" curiously queried Keene. "Peace has told me something about her coming here, but how do you know she hasn't any father?"

"Well, if she has he ain't worth a cuss, or he'd be on hand to look after her," was the grim retort. "So, as the game now lays, I'm her pa. Now s'pose you two shake hands so we'll all be friendly and handsome-like."

Keene smiled good-naturedly and extended his hand. Peace hesitated, then said frankly:

"Don't think I'm nursing any hard feeling, but I can't take your hand now and mean it. Perhaps later I shall feel different. If you remain in the same frame of mind we won't lose anything by waiting, but if you change in the meantime it'll show there wasn't any call to shake now."

"Have it your own way. Anything to keep things pleasant," said Keene carelessly.

Uncle Dick gave them a sharp, searching glance to assure himself they understood and would refrain from further quarreling; then he rose and tapped on the girl's door. She bade him enter, and he found her seated by the window, staring out at the sentinel peaks while the Arapaho woman brushed her hair.

She turned impulsively and, when she saw Uncle Dick, caught his hand in hers and looked up eagerly into his kindly face.

"You found something?" she murmured.

"Met old Satanta and got scared and come back," he replied. "That old cuss is up to mischief. You've heard of him?"

She shook her head.

"There was much talk about the Apaches," she said.

"That was when you were in New Mexico—probably Santa Fé. How's the mem'ry?"

Her voice held a little note of sadness as she answered:

"I find myself saying things that suggest other

things, such as the convent, the South, Spanish-speaking people. I recall everything that happened since I recovered my senses here, but I remember nothing of how I came here or where I came from. I know I can ride a horse. I can see myself doing it, but I can't remember ever being on a horse."

"You're mind's keen as a brier. You'll remember everything if you'll just take your time and don't get to fretting," Uncle Dick heartily assured her.

"I don't know," she faltered. "I still have silly notions. There was the sick man who frightened me when I saw the bandage across his face. Now it's stage-coaches."

"Stage-coaches?" blankly repeated Uncle Dick.

"They drive through the gate and the men crowd around them. Then I feel horribly afraid."

Uncle Dick thought of her up on Devil's Elbow, horrified to behold her kinsman participating in the hold-up of Turkey Bill's coach, and he pitied her from the depths of his great heart. Openly, however, he laughed at the notion and reassured her.

"Of course, you're nervous. You got a mighty bad bump on the head. Till you get used to things you'll feel shy and skittish at everything that seems new to you. Now there's Samuel Keene, the young man I said could come here. You probably didn't relish his coming."

"Oh, just the other way round!" she eagerly cried. "He's so awkward, so homely; and yet he seems very nice. He makes me laugh at what he says and does—only——"

He waited half a minute, then urged, "Only what, Mary June?"

"Only he and Mr. Peace don't seem to like each other. It seems a pity when both are so nice. It isn't what they say, but what they think. I can feel them jar every time they look at each other."

"Two young fools," snorted Uncle Dick. "Mary June, don't you let either one get to talking any nonsense to you."

She stared at him blankly, then blushed crimson.

"Oh, nothing that way," she murmured. "They're both very nice and polite. If I could only have them round one at a time I should enjoy them both. They're entirely different. If they should talk any nonsense I should pretend I was losing my mind again. That would scare them."

"Haven't drawn any more picters?"

She shook her head.

"You don't remember anything connected with the name Purgatory?"

Another shake of the head.

"Nor the Picketwire?"

A third negative.

"El Rio," began the Arapaho woman, who had followed their English speech quite closely.

"—de las Animas Perditas!" hurriedly completed the girl, her gaze growing frightened.

"The Quail knows the old Spanish name," mumbled Uncle Dick, pretending not to notice her emotion.

"But why did I say that? The River of Lost Souls!" she cried.

"Because you've lived in New Mexico and have heard it often, just as you remember the Alameda in Santa Fé," he soothed.

"But I spoke it without thinking. When I said the words, I could see the river racing and foaming between walls." She shivered violently and closed her eyes.

"What else?" whispered Uncle Dick.

"Skeletons!" she sobbed, dropping her head on her arm. "I shall never fully recover! When I think I'm improving that horrid thought pops into my head."

"I'm all sorts of an old fool to put ugly notions into your pretty head," growled Uncle Dick, awkwardly stroking her hair. "Don't try to remember anything. You're all right just as you are. You've recovered entirely. What does it matter if you don't remember some things? Some of them are bound to be disagreeable and best forgotten. Why, there's oceans and oceans of things I've let slip from my mem'ry. Just rest easy with being Mary June. Sometime, when we get round to it, we'll change it to Mary Wooton. If your old name ever does come back to you, you can slip it on or stick to mine. Now what about a bit to eat? I've eaten with the young men, as we had some things to talk over."

"The Quail will bring me something in here," answered the girl, patting the squaw's hand.

"Preety," gurgled the squaw. Then she spoke to Uncle Dick in Arapaho.

"She is the medicine-woman of the Purgatory."

"I know. But she remembers nothing of it. See

you don't bring it back to her," warned Uncle Dick, rising.

In the big room he found Keene and Peace, seated far apart smoking their pipes. Keene rose and walked to the door, casting a quick glance at his host. Uncle Dick followed him outside, as the young man spoke.

"It's about that trade stuff. Two mule-loads in the corral if the Injuns ain't stolen it. Put your own price on it. What I really got you out here for was to ask if you wanted anything said about that man's death and the two nuggets of gold."

"No, not till I tell it."

"I reckoned as much. If Peace had been more neighborly I might have blurted it out."

"I probably shall tell Peace, but leave the telling to me. See here, my girl rather reckons she'd enjoy you two more if she took you separate. S'pose we fix it that way—that you take turns talking to her?"

"That would be very pleasant, only what talking I do must be done quickly, as I shall soon be leaving here."

"I see," mused Uncle Dick. "South or north?"

"South. Now the trading jig is up I must get at something else."

"Too bad you and Joe couldn't hit it off better. You two could 'a' gone prospecting together."

"I had hoped to do that, but it's no good to feel sorry over what can't be helped. I wouldn't blame him for not wanting to bother with me even if he'd felt friendly. Perhaps I'll try it alone on my way south—that is, if you can outfit me."

"Reckon I have about everything a prospector can use—left over from building the road," said Uncle Dick. "When do you want to start?"

Keene laughed softly and said:

"Perfectly willing to be rid of me, eh? I don't blame you. If I was as old as you I'd be slow to take up with strangers."

"What'n hell are you saying?" thundered Uncle Dick. "I reckon I can outfit you to-morrer."

Keene grimaced but agreed.

"Then I'll start to-morrow—rather sudden. Reckon I'll have a try at the gold-mine where Boy Charlie got those two nuggets. Must be somewhere between here and the Purgatory."

"Thought you was sharp-set to travel south?" reminded Uncle Dick.

"Changed my mind. I'll bet that Baptiste is already hoofing round to find where the nuggets came from."

"Then you'll stand a small chance of finding it first. He knows the country."

"I think I know where I can pick up a few thousand dollars," was the quiet reply.

Uncle Dick finished filling his pipe, his bushy brows bunching with perplexity as he watched Keene.

"You must have heard Baptiste talk about the road-agents," he remarked.

"I think he has some understanding with them," readily replied Keene. "Not that any strangers came to see him, but he used to be gone several days at a time. He seemed to have plenty of gold, but he never brought back any furs or robes."

"Huh. He's a snake. Ever talk about Gentleman Ralph?"

With a slight start Keene turned away and then lazily answered:

"He may have. Don't remember."

"You've heard of Ralph?" demanded Uncle Dick, whose quick eyes had missed nothing in the other's behavior.

"Some odds and ends, but I'm new to the mountains. Come out from Missouri. Before that I lived up in Pennsylvania. Think I heard some of the wagon-train I was traveling with speak of him. They was always yarning about a new breed of outlaws, who stole whole trains and didn't leave a single soul to give evidence against them. Mostly bosh, I took it."

"Maybe," agreed Uncle Dick, "but I reckon there's no doubt but what the leader of the gang calls himself Gentleman Ralph. Ain't his real name, though. The Simon-pure Ralph was some critter. This recent chap sneaked the name. Probably a cheap cuss without brains enough to think up a new handle."

"Baptiste never let on anything about him, but that's not surprising, as we two wa'n't what you'd call exactly chummy. I still reckon that the breed was in touch with the gang."

"And yet you'll risk your life going back there and prospecting for gold?" curiously asked Uncle Dick.

"It's because I believe the breed is in cahoots with the gang that I'm going. If I'm right I'll pick up a few thousand mighty easy."

Uncle Dick was completely at a loss to understand this speech.

"Just what do you mean by that, Mr. Samuel Keene?" he slowly inquired.

"You're forgetting the reward of five thousand offered for Boy Charlie, dead or alive," said Keene with a broad grin. "If Baptiste is in with the gang he won't disturb the grave to collect the reward, and I'll make five thousand without much work."

"Good lord! Going to dig him up?" gasped Uncle Dick, taken aback by the young man's calmness in announcing his ghoulish program.

"Why not, if he's worth five thousand?"

Uncle Dick studied him thoughtfully, then shook his head and observed:

"I may be mistook about you in several ways, but I'll bet a jug you've got your nerve with you. But here comes the stage, and it must be One-Eyed Cassidy driving, by the way he's taking that down-grade."

It was the north-bound coach, and the six mules were finishing the two-mile stretch from the top of the ridge in a tearing gallop. Cries of alarm from the passengers were mingled with the stentorian calls of the driver and the pistol-like crack of his long lash. So terrific was the approach that Uncle Dick leaped to the middle of the road and waved his hat in protest.

As the animals were pulled up, the passengers hastily escaped pell-mell, firmly believing they were near victims of a run-away. One-Eyed Cassidy removed his foot from the brake and, with a broad grin, asked:

"Feared I was going through yer old gate?"

"I feared you was tearing up my toll-road," coldly retorted Uncle Dick. "What do you mean by taking my station that way?"

"Easy, old hoss-fly! When ye've had th' honor of bein' held up by Gentleman Ralph hisself, an' then let go without losin' a single penny, ye've got a right to celebrate by hittin' only th' high spots."

"The driver speaks truly, sir," spluttered one of the passengers. "This robber was very considerate. We travelers need to be protected from reckless drivers more than we do from road-agents."

"No guards, as usual," mused Uncle Dick. "What about the treasure-box?"

"None aboard this trip. Travelin' light, as a member of Congress is keen to git back to his lonesome constitooants," guffawed Cassidy, opening and closing his one optic in a pantomime of high derision. "Box to foller on th' next coach."

"This outlaw was dressed in black—quite distinguished-looking," informed another passenger.

"If you folks want to eat ye better hustle inside an' be sharp about it," growled the driver.

This stampeded the passengers to the eating-room. After they had crowded through the door, Cassidy grinned knowingly and slowly descended from the box.

"Why did he hold you up if he didn't want anything? And how do you know he is this Gentleman Ralph?" curiously asked Keene, who had remained an interested spectator of the scene.

"Mebbe I read his thoughts, young feller," sneered

One-Eyed Cassidy, resenting a stranger's addressing him with a double-barrel question. "Mebbe I ain't tellin' what I know except to Dick Wooton."

He glared savagely at Keene's good-natured face, and the latter took the hint and turned on his heel and walked toward the corral.

Uncle Dick puffed his pipe and waited. He knew Cassidy had further business with him, else he would be assailing the food inside. The driver cast a glance after Keene, then slyly produced a slip of paper from his belt and handed it to Uncle Dick, saying:

"Here it is, an' I want a line of writin' to show I delivered it. Save me from runnin' into a nest of trouble. Always want to prove I've done what I promised."

Uncle Dick opened the paper and read:

Please put my daughter, the girl you call Mary June, on the coach bringing this. Failure to do this will be bad medicine for you.

GENTLEMAN RALPH.

Uncle Dick puffed out his cheeks and rubbed his head thoughtfully. The information that Miss Mary was the daughter of the notorious bandit leader would have been a paralyzing piece of news, had he not already learned that her only known kinsman was buried on the bank of Muddy Creek.

"The damn' liar!" he grunted.

"He said you'd give me somethin' which would be called for on the way down the pass."

"Yes, there's a answer," mumbled Uncle Dick,

fishing out a scrap of paper and the stub of a pencil. "Give him this."

He laboriously wrote:

G. RALPH, so called:

Go plum to hell. Or you can come and fetch her away yourself. RICHENS LACY WOOTON.

"There! That oughter please him," he said, handing the folded paper to the driver. "But I don't see how you can give it to him in person if you left him on the south side of the pass."

"Can't, of course, but some of his men will stop me for the answer. Now I can eat."

As he rushed to the eating-room he nearly collided with Joe Peace. The latter hastened to Uncle Dick and cried:

"Seems there is a Gentleman Ralph beyond any doubt! The passengers were quite taken with him."

"Seems there sure is a cuss that's taken over the original Ralph's name. How'd you like to get a peep at some of the gang?"

"I'd like it," was the eager reply.

"You're likely to have a chance if you're careful," whispered Uncle Dick, passing over the note.

Peace read it and whistled in amazement.

"What did you answer?" he cried.

"Told him to go to hell."

"But to think Miss Mary's the daughter of this Ralph! Well, well."

"Bad, bad," corrected Uncle Dick. "That is, bad if it was true."

"But outlaws brought her here," protested Peace. "She must be related to some of them. Better the daughter of the king-pin than of a meaner dog."

"She ain't the daughter of any of 'em. Her dad's long since dead. None of the gang is a relation of hers. I found out that much while away. I ain't told her anything and I shan't. If her mem'ry comes back she'll know the truth without my saying anything."

"But what did you learn? How did you get hold of it?"

"The only relation she had is dead. His hist'ry died with him. He wasn't known round these parts," evaded Uncle Dick. "And what ain't known by you and every other young buck won't ever embarrass the girl. She starts life up here with a new deck."

"Then this message from Ralph is a lie," murmured Peace.

"Much like unto that," grimaced Uncle Dick.

"Think of his gall! Actually threatens you! What'll you do?"

"Stick along here and mind my knitting. Seems this Ralph wants to carry the pipe against me. All right. I've got a war-pipe of my own."

"If any of the gang stops Cassidy for your answer, I'll take a shot at them if I'm plugged for it. Wonder if that Keene would go along. I don't know whether he's got any fighting guts or not."

"I sort of reckon he'll assay out top-high," Uncle Dick gravely declared. "I'll swear he ain't gun-shy."

"I don't like him, but if he's game and will chip in we can do a good turn for the girl."

"Here he comes. S'pose you put it up to him?"

Keene came lounging round the station-house, the freckles on his whimsical face seeming to glint in the horizontal sunbeams. In another hour it would be growing dark at the foot of the pass. One-Eyed Cassidy emerged from the eating-room and climbed to his seat. The passengers cast a hurried glance over the wonderful horizon and reluctantly took their places inside. While Uncle Dick raised the gate, Peace confronted Keene.

"Some of the road-agents are expected to stop the coach down the pass to receive a message from Uncle Dick. The boss of the crowd wrote him and asked him something. Cassidy carries the reply. I'm going to tag along and probably shall have a run-in with the gang. Question is, are you game to take a hand?"

Keene shrugged his shoulders, hitched up his belt and drawled:

"Why not? Can't talk to the girl. Can't do much of anything up here. It oughter be exciting."

"I'm quite sure it will be," coldly replied Peace. "I'm off."

"I'll get my hoss and follow you," promptly assured Keene, running to the corral.

The coach lurched and swayed down the road. Peace rushed through the gate to follow behind it at about a hundred paces. He was turning the first bend in the road when Keene rode from the corral and hurried after him. He sat the saddle awkwardly, his feet thrust wide, altogether presenting an ungainly figure.

Uncle Dick lowered the gate and watched till coach

and horsemen were swallowed up, then slowly returned to the house, meditating.

"Wonder how long before they come back. Well, if they bag any of the gang, it's five thousand apiece. Good luck go with them. Hate like hell to turn in till I know how it pans out."

Lighting a handful of dead brush in the fireplace, Uncle Dick watched its brief life die out, dreaming it was a camp-fire and that beaver was again king of the mountains and fetching eight to ten dollars a pound, and that hide and tallow hunters had not yet invaded the plains to slaughter the buffaloes. The crackle of the flames through the resinous wood and the sharp, yet soothing, reek of the smoke, furnished a background for his motley imagination.

He saw the hired and the free trappers come to the annual rendezvous. He saw them gambling away a season's profits, sitting cross-legged around a buffalo-robe. Euchre and seven-up, with beaver pelts for currency. Horses and rifles and even their clothes were staked, also their squaws, if they possessed any. Through the dark smoke he evoked the memory of one old mountain-man who had wagered his scalp. The fancies were of the days when the Shoshoni, or Snakes, "hoss-an'-buff'lo Injuns," were mighty on the plains; when the Comanche, of Shoshonean stock, ruled the Southwest, driven there by Sioux tribes just as the Snakes had been pushed back to the mountains.

Uncle Dick's reverie, impelled by the fire and its intoxicating aroma, pictured the old-time trappers as being as primitive almost as the savages they lived and

fought with. Once more he was with them, living in unmapped recesses of the mountains. From the Gila to the frozen ground of the far north, from the Mississippi to the outlet of the Colorado, he and his pals traveled and fought and played, within the space of time it took for tinder-like brush to be sucked up the stone chimney.

Between his fireplace and Pike's Peak was the site of a little trading-post known as "the Pueblo," built between 1840 and 1842; he couldn't exactly remember the date. It was only a quarter of a century old, and yet it was as thoroughly obliterated by the new life as if it had been the work of the mound-builders. Only the clear and rapid Arkansas remained the same, as it hurried on between the high bluffs that formerly encircled the old post.

Lifting his inner vision farther north, the mountaineer saw Fort Union on the upper Missouri. What a story could be told of the forked road starting at Independence and ending at Santa Fé and Willamette—endless battles with nature and the red men! He glimpsed the long paths traveled by the Hopi in seeking salt on the Colorado. It was like turning the pages of an old and well-thumbed book, this recalling the innumerable tribal alliances brought about by pursuit of the buffalo. What momentous migrations of entire Indian nations the disappearance of fur-bearing animals had caused! Crammed into the period of thirty years were changes and biological tragedies enough to have filled centuries. And Uncle Dick, before his bit of a brushwood fire, reviewed it all and

was glad the new had come, though saddened that the old must go.

"I'm getting to be a dad-rotted old softy," he muttered, shaking his head to be rid of the spell and instinctively following the habit of the early years in fumbling for his pipe-holder, gay with beads and quills, an indispensable part of a mountain man's dress, but now relegated to the limbo of disuse. "No knowing as anything will happen, but, if something does happen, no knowing when they'll come back to tell me. Gentleman Ralph says she's his girl. Her uncle swore Ralph never knew she was with the gang. Seems Ralph's learned a lot since she was fetched here. I guess I'll turn in. If it wa'n't for Mary June, I'd 'a' gone along with the boys to take in the fun."

Again he fumbled at his neck for the pipe-holder, grinned sheepishly, placed his pipe in its orthodox box on the stone shelf and started to retire; but just then the girl glided into the room. With the little affectionate gesture he was so fond of, she took his hands.

"Didn't see you round when the passengers was here," he remarked. "You ain't fretted at the sight of strangers, be you? If so, say it, and I'll make them feed outdoors."

"No, no!" she quickly protested. "Not the passengers. I like to watch them and talk with them. I'm always thinking there might be one who would know me and say, 'Why, Miss Isobel——' "

With wildly staring eyes she looked up into his face, her lips mutely repeating the name that had so unconsciously come to her tongue.

"Isobel what?" he softly encouraged.

"I don't know. Isobel! Yes, it's my name—part of my name."

"I'm positive it is," he quietly assured. "Take it easy. The rest of the handle will pop into your mind before you know it. Don't try to think about it. No good trying to crowd it. Just let it loaf in when it gets ready. We're getting along fine, but if you don't mind the passengers why don't you mix more with them? Why stick so much in your room?"

"It's the stage-coach," she explained with a little shiver. "It's foolish of me, but every time I see one something tries to crowd into my thoughts that I'm afraid of. I think I'll say good night."

"Good night, Mary Isobel. Don't fret over nothing. Everything is coming fine."

He watched her pass into her room and heard the low, guttural voice of the Arapaho woman petting her. Then, with a mournful shake of his head, he made the rounds to see all was well and retired to his own little room, taking with him fragments of memories which slumber would piece together into a tapestry of the brave days.

He dreamed he was with Carson on a lonely mountain stream and that the prince of mountain men had cried out that redskins were stealing their horses. Then came the shrill cry of warriors, and Carson was giving warning that it was an attack, rather than an attempt to stampede their horses. He rolled from the couch and came to his feet.

A woman's voice screamed somewhere in the

house. This was no dream-cry. Fumbling about in the darkness for his clothes, he half dressed and, seizing a revolver, plunged into the big room just as the cry was repeated, only this time either muffled or coming from a distance. Blundering to the girl's room, he threw back the door and called her name. He was answered by a groan and a thick voice gasping:

"Preety!"

Not pausing to learn how badly the Arapaho woman was hurt, he rushed outdoors. A shot rang out and was followed by a grunt of pain. Then came the clatter of horses' hoofs. Racing recklessly to the road beyond the gate, he all but tripped over a dark object on the ground.

"Cut-Hand came too late," spoke the man, in Arapaho. "Big Knife tried to stop them from taking the medicine-woman away."

Realizing pursuit afoot was useless, Uncle Dick helped the Indian to his feet, demanding:

"Are you badly hurt?"

"The white man's bullet cut my head," replied the Indian, stoical now that he had an audience. "There were two of them."

He was helping the Indian to the cook-house, where lights were springing up, when he suddenly halted, his wrathful eyes growing incredulous.

"Listen!" he cried. "Gorry-mighty! A stage-coach!"

"It goes down the pass," Big Knife informed.

"No coach has passed through the gate."

"It goes down the pass," was the curt response.

Leaving the mystery for future investigation, he got the Indian into the cook-house and ordered a trembling Mexican to make lights in the eating-room. Satisfying himself that Big Knife's wound was only a graze along the scalp, he followed the Mexican and, snatching up a light, entered the girl's room. The Quail was trying to rise and, on the entrance of Uncle Dick, promptly ceased her moaning. There was a brutal wound on her head, and only the thick braids of hair had saved her from a fractured skull. The window was open. The bed was undisturbed, and the girl was gone.

Big Knife, smeared with blood, now appeared behind him. Motioning him to help, Uncle Dick lifted the Quail to the bed and brought whisky. As her returning senses recognized the nature of the restorative she gulped it down eagerly. In answer to his fierce questioning she answered:

"The medicine-woman did not want to sleep. We sat at the open window. The door behind us opened and something like a big black bird fell over the pretty one. Then I was on the floor, my head full of queer noises and ghost-lights."

"Some one came through the door? You mean through the window!" cried Uncle Dick.

The Quail stared blankly at the ceiling. She had spoken. She would not speak again. Uncle Dick wheeled in time to save some of the liquor, but not before Big Knife had swallowed enough to make him forget his bloody head.

"Look after him," he commanded the Mexican.

house. This was no dream-cry. Fumbling about in the darkness for his clothes, he half dressed and, seizing a revolver, plunged into the big room just as the cry was repeated, only this time either muffled or coming from a distance. Blundering to the girl's room, he threw back the door and called her name. He was answered by a groan and a thick voice gasping:

"Preety!"

Not pausing to learn how badly the Arapaho woman was hurt, he rushed outdoors. A shot rang out and was followed by a grunt of pain. Then came the clatter of horses' hoofs. Racing recklessly to the road beyond the gate, he all but tripped over a dark object on the ground.

"Cut-Hand came too late," spoke the man, in Arapaho. "Big Knife tried to stop them from taking the medicine-woman away."

Realizing pursuit afoot was useless, Uncle Dick helped the Indian to his feet, demanding:

"Are you badly hurt?"

"The white man's bullet cut my head," replied the Indian, stoical now that he had an audience. "There were two of them."

He was helping the Indian to the cook-house, where lights were springing up, when he suddenly halted, his wrathful eyes growing incredulous.

"Listen!" he cried. "Gorry-mighty! A stage-coach!"

"It goes down the pass," Big Knife informed.

"No coach has passed through the gate."

"It goes down the pass," was the curt response.

Leaving the mystery for future investigation, he got the Indian into the cook-house and ordered a trembling Mexican to make lights in the eating-room. Satisfying himself that Big Knife's wound was only a graze along the scalp, he followed the Mexican and, snatching up a light, entered the girl's room. The Quail was trying to rise and, on the entrance of Uncle Dick, promptly ceased her moaning. There was a brutal wound on her head, and only the thick braids of hair had saved her from a fractured skull. The window was open. The bed was undisturbed, and the girl was gone.

Big Knife, smeared with blood, now appeared behind him. Motioning him to help, Uncle Dick lifted the Quail to the bed and brought whisky. As her returning senses recognized the nature of the restorative she gulped it down eagerly. In answer to his fierce questioning she answered:

"The medicine-woman did not want to sleep. We sat at the open window. The door behind us opened and something like a big black bird fell over the pretty one. Then I was on the floor, my head full of queer noises and ghost-lights."

"Some one came through the door? You mean through the window!" cried Uncle Dick.

The Quail stared blankly at the ceiling. She had spoken. She would not speak again. Uncle Dick wheeled in time to save some of the liquor, but not before Big Knife had swallowed enough to make him forget his bloody head.

"Look after him," he commanded the Mexican.

With that he darted to his room and completed his dressing; then, taking his rifle and a second revolver, he rushed outdoors.

Down the pass sounded voices yelling in fear and rage. They were approaching the open gate. Completely bewildered but hoping the girl had been rescued, Uncle Dick halted at the gate and waited.

At last figures were discernible and, above the general clamor, rose the husky voice of One-Eyed Cassidy exhausting his vocabulary of oaths. "Shut up that racket!" bawled Uncle Dick, running to meet them. "Did you get the girl?"

"What girl?" bellowed Cassidy.

"Miss Mary?" gasped the voice of Joe Peace.

A blur detached itself from the mass and limped ahead rapidly.

"What about Miss Mary?"

"Stolen! What was that hullabuloo I heard? I hoped you'd got her."

"Hell!" howled Peace, raising his clenched fists in impotent rage. "She must have been in the coach when it rode through us."

"The coach? Who's in this party, anyway?" thundered Uncle Dick.

"Cassidy and the passengers," groaned Peace.

"Where's Keene?"

"Ask Gentleman Ralph," was the bitter reply.

CHAPTER V

UNCLE DICK TAKES THE TRAIL

AFTER the passengers were disposed of for the night Uncle Dick requested Peace to relate what had happened in the pass. As the young prospector talked, the mountaineer worked over his weapons, bringing them up to the last degree of efficiency. He even bothered to hunt up a little whetstone in a buckskin case, a relic of his trapping days, in order to give his knife a razor edge.

"Keene was behind me," began Peace. "I pulled in for him to come up, knowing that if there was any fighting it was for him and me to handle it. He suggested that we separate and ride along the edge of the bush on each side of the road. This move would let us draw near the gang when they stuck up the coach and, so long as we kept under cover, they couldn't know that only two men were attacking them.

"It was a good idea, only things didn't pan out right. I hadn't been in the bush two minutes when a hunk of lead whipped across from the other side of the road and plugged my horse through the neck. The poor beast went down with hardly a kick. The coach then was a good quarter of a mile ahead. I lost time in trying to

nail the skunk across the road. Then came a howl from the passengers and I knew they was held up.

"Keeping under cover, I worked along but I hadn't covered hardly any of the distance when the coach came swinging back up the grade. I took it for granted One-Eyed Cassidy had managed to turn about and was making a run for it. I yelled out and the driver took a shot at me. 'One-Eyed Cassidy mistakes me for an outlaw,' I told myself. There was a bunch of men down the road, and I couldn't understand why they didn't mount their horses and chase the coach, or at least fire after it. I never suspected they weren't agents until I'd lost fifteen or twenty minutes crawling up to where I could do the most damage; then to my amazement I heard Cassidy swear.

"I felt knocked in a heap. Cassidy was before me in the road, so he couldn't have been on the box when the coach went by, but, if he wasn't driving the coach, then it must have been an agent. But why on earth should one of the gang drive the coach back to the toll-gate where you'd recognize him and try to pot him? It all seemed very crazy. I called out my name so Cassidy wouldn't shoot, and joined him. Cassidy said they was held up and not a second wasted by the outlaws in making the passengers pile out into the road. Cassidy was driven from the box. One man kept them covered while two others took the coach back. I tried to locate the man who had stood guard over them, but he had slipped away while I was making myself known."

"Didn't care to meet you," growled Uncle Dick.

"We all started for the toll-gate and was 'most there when we heard the coach coming, and coming hard. It was upon us in the darkness almost before we knew it. The passengers dug for cover. Cassidy and me took some shots at the box and received some back. It was all over in no time. If I'd had any idea Miss Mary was inside, I'd have chased it afoot."

"Wouldn't have done any good," gloomily said Uncle Dick. "They used the coach to get the girl away to some point where they'd feel safe to pack her on a horse. You haven't said anything about Keene."

"I didn't see hide nor hair of him after we separated to scout the bush on both sides of the road."

"And that's what you meant when you said, 'Ask Gentleman Ralph'?"

"Well, he isn't with us—hasn't been with us. I won't put it any stronger 'n that. You know I don't like him, and when you don't like any one it's easy to think him a bad one, so I'll keep mum."

"Exactly," mused Uncle Dick, scowling heavily. "He was a neighbor to Baptiste, the trader. They was fighting over a dead man but not doing each other any harm. I haven't any doubt but what Baptiste is a go-between for the gang. He'd never stick up a coach, but he'd do lots of spying for them. He'd send word when a heavy box was coming through."

"They fought over a dead man?" puzzled Peace.

"To be correct they fought over what he had on him. No time to give the whole yarn now."

"But who was he?"

Uncle Dick was now making for the door, anxious

to get into action. On the threshold he paused only long enough to say:

"One of the agents—Boy Charlie."

"Hell's hinges! Boy Charlie? Potted? Who was lucky enough to rub him out?" cried Peace.

"No place to talk here. We'll powwow as we ride. I'm off to get the girl."

Peace lost no time in finding a horse. As they rode down the toll-road with the night raising a black wall before them, they listened for some sound of the outlaws climbing the steep slopes on either hand. In an undertone Uncle Dick told what he knew of the girl's abduction.

"But Boy Charlie—how come he to cash in?" interrupted Peace.

Uncle Dick described the scene at Muddy Creek but revealed nothing about Boy Charlie's slayer and victim, nor did he say anything about the rough map and the relationship between Miss Mary and the second outlaw. He was reticent because he wished to keep the facts from the girl for all time, providing she did not recover her memory and recall what she had seen from the Devil's Elbow.

"Charlie just rode up to the creek, dying from a hole clean through him, and Keene and Baptiste quarreled over some gold he had on him," was Uncle Dick's summary.

Peace remained silent for several minutes, then said:

"If the agents are fighting among themselves then Gentleman Ralph's game can't last long. It must have been another agent that drilled him."

"If it wasn't, we'd hear some one bragging of what he'd done and asking for the reward," said Uncle Dick. "Ralph's game won't last a second after I get him at the end of a gun."

"If he was shot by one of the gang they must have quarreled over something," mused Peace.

"They're hot-headed. May have been drunk."

"Maybe Gentleman Ralph shot him," suggested Peace.

"I don't think so," demurred Uncle Dick. "If he's what they crack him up to be no man he plugged would ride to Muddy Crick. He'd drop where he was hit."

"The Overland Company ought to hire some gun-fighters to take their coaches through. If I was the boss I'd rig a coach that was gun-proof, pick up a few bad men and send them out to be held up. Once the agents stubbed against one or two such traps every coach would look like an ambush to them."

"That's a mighty good idee!" indorsed Uncle Dick. "Turkey Bill is a prime driver and never held himself up to be anything else, but Cassidy always claimed to be a two-gun man, even if he has got only one eye. Oughter be ashamed to let one man hold him up."

"One man's good as a dozen if he has the drop on you," was the terse response. "I know, for I've been through it." Then he continued forcefully, "But no one man will ever hold me up again unless he kills me."

"Good boy! Now here we are at the lake. I can almost make things out. They never planned to take the coach out of the pass and I have a notion they quit it about here. Look round and see if you can locate it."

He had scarcely said this when a mule brayed dead ahead, and they found the coach abandoned on one side of the road. There was nothing to indicate on which side of the pass the outlaws had escaped, but Uncle Dick, recalling the bullet fired at him from the west side a few days before, wheeled to the left.

"Figuring it must be one side or the other, eh?" mused Peace.

"I know it's this side," Uncle Dick quietly responded. "We can't do much till daylight, however."

Peace fumed and cursed and at last declared:

"It's a bit lighter. I can't stay here like a stick any longer. If they went up this side there must be a path. I'll mouse round. You stay here. I'll leave my nag and will be back by sunup."

He entered the pines and worked along slowly, his footsteps advertising his course for some minutes. These sounds grew fainter and fainter and finally ceased. Uncle Dick seated himself between the two horses and lighted his pipe. Two hours passed and the east began to put on paint, layer after layer, topping off with a vermilion, much like a warrior decorating his face for battle. Suddenly the pass lost its obscurity. The entire length of the ragged hem of pine emerged from the darkness and stood clearly defined. Rising and stretching his arms, Uncle Dick put up his pipe and climbed into the saddle, holding his rifle over the pommel. Outwardly he was composed; inwardly he fretted at Peace's failure to return. At last he tethered his young friend's horse and turned his own animal toward the steep slope.

Near the edge of the plateau, where the rocky shelf ended abruptly and left only room for the toll-road to crowd along beside Raton Creek, he came to a spot where the drooping pine boughs showed broken needles and twigs. Urging his horse into what seemed to be an impenetrable barrier, he bowed his head and soon found himself permitted to sit erect in the shadowy tunnel which extended far up the rough slope.

He knew this must be one of the hidden paths used by the bandits. He held his rifle in both hands and allowed his mount to pick his own footing up the narrow trail. The growth on either side was practically impassable to horsemen, and the path he was following was not entirely the work of nature. The frequent raw stubs showing through the carpet of needles showed the work of an ax.

"Derned young fool to go ahead alone when he might have come back and told me," grumbled the mountaineer.

Now the way ascended a sharp grade and apparently terminated on a ridge. Uncle Dick slipped from the saddle and sent the horse scrambling on ahead. Traveling in this fashion, he not only spared his mount but also interposed a bulwark between himself and any possible ambush at the top of the ridge. The steady ascent suggested a retreat high up the wall of the pass, but such a hiding-place, bound to be something of a cul-de-sac at the best, impressed the mountaineer as being illogical and not in keeping with the reputed shrewdness of the mysterious leader.

"If this path keeps going it'll prove this gang is a

bunch of idiots," he growled, beginning to find the footwork laborious.

The ridge was gained without his encountering any opposition, and now he found the trail split, one fork swinging back south and presumably running parallel to the face of the cliff, the other dipping north, as if to strike the mouth of the pass at a considerable distance below the little lake. Uncle Dick elected to follow the latter trail, as the other must debouch into the main road somewhere near the toll-gate. His new course, for some distance, ran under an overhanging cliff, with the pines crowding close on his right. As he had no desire to be ambushed by the kidnapers, he advanced most cautiously. Could he know that the outlaws had utilized this inside route to reach the mouth of the pass, his task would have been very simple and he could press on at full speed, but the cliff on his left was continually presenting little pockets where a dozen men could hide very comfortably, and it was the fear of stumbling upon the enemy in some such hiding-place that frequently caused him to halt and weigh the risk.

Finally he reached a point where he could see that the trail ahead ran smack into a solid somber wall of pine, indicating that it must turn almost at right angles. He wondered what trap might be lying in wait for him just round the bend, and, walking behind his horse, he held his rifle ready. On reaching the turn, he found it followed a shoulder of the ledge and led out on to a small plateau.

"The Devil's Elbow!" he softly exclaimed, halting his horse and dropping on all fours. "The girl was up

here, but she never came the way I came. There must be other trails leading from this shelf."

He crawled toward the edge of the plateau until he could see the road below. It was from this point that the girl had been horrified at beholding the robbery of Turkey Bill's stage.

Lying prone, he reconnoitered the toll-road. It wound in and out among the pines, crossing Raton Creek many times. In places the creek flowed under large flat rocks and was hidden from view. Uncle Dick could not resist a thrill of pride as he stared down on the road his hands had constructed between the towering gray rocks and the gloomy evergreens.

He had been among the first to prove that Raton Pass could be used by pack-animals. He was the first to realize that, by blasting and bridge-building, it could be made fit for freighters, immigrant trains and stage-coaches. It had been left for him to open a short-cut to Trinidad and northeastern New Mexico, but, in constructing his road and dealing only with essentials, he had never taken the time to indulge his curiosity concerning the narrow, crooked plateau or shelf called the Devil's Elbow.

As he watched, he saw something moving far down the road and made out a horseman ascending. The road twisted and turned and was lost to sight in patches, and the horseman was hugging the edge of the pines. His pace was leisurely and, from Uncle Dick's coign of vantage, he scarcely seemed to move. Then the road vanished and for some minutes the mountaineer patiently waited, his gaze glued on the point where it

emerged into view again. He began to believe the horseman had halted when he suddenly galloped into view. Now he was near enough for the watcher to study his features, had not his face been concealed by a handkerchief.

"One of the damn' gang!" excitedly whispered Uncle Dick, pushing his rifle over the edge of the rock and estimating the range. "Mustn't overshoot."

Before he could get the range and try his skill a disconcerting thing happened. A second horseman darted into view almost beneath the shelf and rode rapidly down the road. This rider also wore a handkerchief across his face. With two to choose from, Uncle Dick was flurried for a moment, his gun-barrel wabbling first to one, then back to the other. Each kept close to the pines and both were approaching a bend in the road. Until they rounded the bend neither could see the other.

"They'll meet about in front of that broken pine. When they do I'll lambast the two of them," decided Uncle Dick, training his rifle on a lightning-shattered tree-stump at the head of the bend.

But, if the unexpected appearance of road-agent number two had startled the mountaineer, the bit of drama to follow astounded him. The two horsemen drew nearer each other, neither suspecting the other's approach until both began rounding the bend. Then the sounds of their horses' hoofs must have given a mutual alarm, for each man straightened and peered ahead, and the next minute they were face to face.

As Uncle Dick stared they raised their rifles and

fired at each other. The next moment the one who had been ascending the road whirled and galloped at break-neck speed over his back-trail, the second masked figure pursuing and shooting. The fugitive discarded his rifle for his revolver and, twisting in the saddle, emptied his weapon. Then the road dipped from view and Uncle Dick awoke from his trance to realize that he had been a passive spectator.

"By old Pike's Peak!" he roared, shaking his rifle in fury. "To think of me sprawling out here and letting two of the critters get away from me and nary a shot from my gun! Next thing I know they'll be fighting duels in my station and I'll be sleepily watching 'em with never a word to say. I reckon young Joe was right when he 'lowed Miss Mary needed a protector."

The exciting spectacle, however, decided him to press on down the strange trail. He hoped to strike the mouth of the pass. The exchange of shots also satisfied him that no bandits were lurking along the cliffs in the neighborhood of the plateau.

As he made to secure his horse a faint cry up the pass caught his attention. Several men were grouped about the stage-coach and, as they seemed to be straightening out the mules, he deduced they were the passengers and One-Eyed Cassidy about to resume their interrupted trip.

Climbing into the saddle he pricked his mount along the trail and soon found himself descending a steep grade, but, as he rode, he discovered the trail did not swing in toward the mouth of the pass as he had

hoped. He now began to catch broad glimpses of the lowlands, and he knew he had diverged several miles from the entrance of the pass. To accentuate his chagrin he soon found himself facing the choice of two routes. One held straight ahead and descended into a narrow cañon, through which he could pass, he thought, to open country. The other swung toward the west, leaving the cañon between it and the pass.

Grunting a favorite oath, he dismounted and studied the terrain. The pass, the narrow cañon and the westerly trail, were three giant fingers extended to rest on the prairie. Uncle Dick elected to descend through the cañon. Leading his horse, he pressed ahead looking for signs of recent passers-by and finding none. He had nearly come to where the actual descent into the cañon began, when he caught the smell of burning wood. Leaving his horse, he entered the débris of landslides and wash and cautiously advanced until he could look down into the cañon.

Almost beneath him was a rude shelter of poles and boughs. A fire was burning before this. At one side were picketed a dozen horses. He knew he had stumbled upon one of the outlaws' resting-places along the route they took in gaining the pass, but it was not the sight of the horses and the figures of men sprawling on the ground that caused him to half rise and aim his rifle. It was the glimpse of a woman suddenly appearing at the entrance of the shack. His view of her was momentary, for no sooner did she show herself than a man sprang from the ground and ran toward her, waving his arms and driving her back.

"If that ain't Miss Mary June Wooton, I'm a liar!" he whispered. "And there's a dozen of 'em. A dozen? A round score."

The amendment was made as a little cavalcade came riding up the cañon. The men on the ground glanced up lazily and continued their smoking. Uncle Dick believed he was gazing on the full force of Gentleman Ralph.

As the newcomers came up to the shack and dismounted, the mountaineer observed that only one had his features concealed. He wore a black mask that began with his hat-brim and ended below his chin. He gave some orders and a man dashed water on the fire, while several of the loungers sprang to their feet and, taking their rifles, hurried toward the mouth of the cañon.

"That's Ralph himself," muttered Uncle Dick. "He's afraid the smoke from the fire may give him away."

The man in the mask spoke again and pointed toward the upper end of the cañon. Two men caught up their arms, mounted and rode to where the trail led up to Uncle Dick's position. They rode leisurely and carelessly and he did not think his presence was suspected, yet their coming forced him to move back. Crawling to his horse, he seized the bridle and stole along the westerly trail.

His problem was to avoid discovery until he could rescue the girl. To enter the cañon by stealth, except as he chanced it at night, was well nigh impossible, and he had no idea the outlaws contemplated more than a

brief halt in the place. The cañon was scarcely more than a crack through the mountain and, with the exception of occasional boulders dotting its floor, lacked covering of any kind. Doubtless a few riflemen could hold the opening against many, while the upper end, thanks to the alluvium, contained a back-door, steep and rugged, yet presenting no great difficulties to the saddlewise.

If pursued into the cañon, the gang only had to ride up the upper slope to gain the hidden trails leading in various directions. By means of these secret paths, probably unknown to law-abiding men, the bandits could double back to the lowlands, moving in small bands over different routes and reassembling at their main rendezvous somewhere along the Purgatory. Already Uncle Dick's partial knowledge of the byways proved that the gang could move parallel to the toll-road or strike into it at numerous points.

"They couldn't 'a' found a better or handier place than these old Raton Mountains," Uncle Dick proudly told himself.

The plight of the girl worried him intensely, although he did not believe she was in any immediate danger. His fear was for the effect of her startling capture on her overwrought nerves. Could he gather a posse of fighting-men, he would bottle both ends of the cañon and get both the gang and the girl, but fighting men in numbers were not to be found offhand.

For a moment he entertained the fanciful notion of waylaying the stage-coach and impressing the passengers and driver into service. The passengers,

however, were sure to be an unknown quantity in fighting-courage, while the driver might be a Turkey Bill, hired to drive and not to hunt robbers. The guards who should be escorting each coach were being concentrated for duty on the division threatened by Indians.

"Reckon that leaves me only Injuns to count on," he mused as he hurried along the trail. "The promiscu's visiting of the Arapahoes at the station shows that some of Big Knife's people must be down below somewhere. Give me a band of 'em, decently armed, and I'll play 'em against the agents—if I can lead 'em."

By this process of elimination he arrived at the conclusion that he must either attempt the girl's rescue single-handed, or trust to rounding up a village of Arapaho warriors. Even if he and Joe Peace had not become separated, the odds would have remained too great for them to face. In fact, he was glad Peace was not with him, for he believed the young prospector would lose all sense of discretion and essay a reckless attack on the camp. Uncle Dick's courage was of the highest quality because it was based on common sense. He felt that to get himself killed while endeavoring to free Miss Mary would be a crime against her.

"Joe would be for riding down on 'em, both guns barking. All right for a fiery young cuss that admires a lively finish, but if I get rubbed out I'm no more use to the girl than some three-point Mackinaw blanket I used thirty years ago. It ain't as if Injuns had her and would kill her before they'd let her be rescued—but why the hell did they steal her?"

This query gave him a jolt. Heretofore he had lived each minute of his quest separately. Now he began to assemble and put ideas together. Why should a gang of road-agents, working under a central control and fully realizing their harvest season must be brief, bother itself with a woman captive? Gentleman Ralph obviously possessed enough brains to know that, once the plains Indians were securely tucked away on their reservations, the authorities would lose no time in erasing the white pest. It was because he had appreciated the conditions that the outlaw leader had emerged from Mexico to make his pile.

"There's no two ways about it," slowly decided Uncle Dick, speaking aloud for the benefit of his horse, "it can't be ransom they're after; they haven't time to arrange the terms, even if they knew she had some rich folks ready to pay up. It's a case of stealing her to make her tell something they want to know. Chuckle-Luck and Boy Charlie and her uncle knew about the nuggets. The last two are dead. Chuckle-Luck tried to play the hand alone, but with Charlie dropping out he had to tell his boss.

"They reckon the outlawing business is picayune alongside of finding the spot where she picked up free gold. This Ralph knows a month of honest mining would bring him more gold than a year of robbing would be likely to do. But no matter why they took her, they've got to be shot up for it, and she must be returned to her new dad, Richens Lacy Wooton.

"Ho, old boy! Easy! We're nearly down to level again and I reckon I can spell my legs."

Reining in at the foot of the last long slope, he studied his back-trail for a few minutes and then swung into the saddle.

He was now committed to the plan of using the friendly Arapahoes. That the "blue-sky" men were somewhere near the cañon and the mouth of the pass, he had no doubt. The sudden arrival and departure of the Quail's people at the station satisfied him of this fact. He rode over the broken country, eagerly gazing about in search of a smoke. He had no intention of quitting the shelter of the foot-hills unless it was to ride to an Arapaho camp, for, once he drew away from the high cliff on his right, which separated him from the cañon, he would be courting discovery by any bandit outpost.

From the corner of his eye he became suddenly conscious of motion on his left and attempted to turn to guard against it. Before he could more than sense the need of a defensive action, however, something dropped over his head, tightened about his body and pinioned his arms to his side. His horse snorted in fright and would have leaped from under him had not his knees and powerful voice reduced the animal to obedience. He guided his mount to a heap of rocks where a brawny savage was gleefully holding the noosed rope taut.

One glance and the mountaineer was joyfully exclaiming:

"Arapaho!" Then he spoke to his captor. "Why do you throw a rope round Cut-Hand?"

The warrior stared into his face blankly for a mo-

ment, then grunted in disgust at his ill luck, shook the noose loose and apologized.

"Cut-Hand wears the white man's hat over his eyes. Standing Bull thought it was another—a bad white man."

"Bad white men are near, but are too many for the Bull to rope," informed Uncle Dick. "Where is your camp? Take me there quick!"

The Indian leisurely disappeared among the rocks and soon came forth on a wiry pony. With a lash of his quirt he pivoted and raced round the mountaineer, but showed no haste in taking a straightaway course.

"Who is at the head of your camp, Hosa?" impatiently asked Uncle Dick.

"Yellow Bear."

Uncle Dick would have preferred it to be Little Raven, yet Yellow Bear, like others of his people, always had expressed a great liking for the toll-gate keeper and more than once, in passing the barrier, had left dressed buckskin as a gift.

"It is well. He is my friend. He will help me."

"Yellow Bear makes medicine," was the somewhat sullen response.

Uncle Dick glanced at him sharply but learned nothing from the immobile features. The Bull's maneuvers to delay their departure for the camp were also disquieting.

"Why new medicine? Is he hunting buffalo? Are his women dressing hides?"

"He gives a feast," said the Bull with a trace of hesitation in his manner.

"He boils for some one who comes to see him. Who?" demanded Uncle Dick.

"He makes a feast for his new medicine. He moves the village. The lodges are down. Let Cut-Hand go home on top of the mountain. When we make our new camp, Standing Bull will come for him and the Arapahoes will make him a big feast."

"For whom does Yellow Bear boil?" repeated Uncle Dick.

The Bull stared straight ahead, playing with his quirt and deaf to the question, but at that moment the soft breeze brought the answer—the faint notes of a bugle sweetly played far off.

"Satanta of the Kiowas is there. Yellow Bear does not make medicine. He listens to bad talk," accused Uncle Dick sternly.

"I am Cut-Hand's friend," sullenly reminded the Bull. "Go to the mountain."

"So is Satanta my friend even when he makes bad talk," said Uncle Dick. "I was at his camp a few sleeps ago. He was after some Ute horse-thieves. I am glad he is with the Arapahoes. I have a talk from Colonel Leavenworth for him."

"Leavenworth is our friend," admitted Standing Bull. "He stopped the Long Knives from fighting us two summers ago. General Dodge wanted to fight us. There were many Indians south of the upper Arkansas then. We would have made a good fight, but we did not want to fight."

"Then we will ride to the camp. Satanta will be glad to hear from his friend."

Saying this, Uncle Dick spoke to his horse.

"We must wait. My pony is lame," persisted the Indian.

"Are the Arapahoes friends of Cut-Hand, or not?" asked Uncle Dick.

"We must wait," repeated the Bull.

Again the mellow song of the bugle blew down the wind, and now Uncle Dick glimpsed a wisp of blue smoke against the blue-black background of the hills.

"You are tired. I will send a fresh pony out to you," he cried, suddenly spurring ahead.

He had covered but a short distance when Standing Bull overtook him and, without a word, rode by his side.

When the camp opened to view Uncle Dick estimated it held some two score warriors. The women and children apparently had been sent back into the hills, for he saw none. Their absence gave a grave complexion to Yellow Bear's purpose. Satanta's presence could only be explained on the theory that he was bringing a war-pipe to the Arapahoes.

As the two horsemen rode down on the camp, the Bull waved a signal and the warriors sprang to their feet and called others from the lodges to gather in a line before the newcomers. The aggressive semicircle relaxed as they recognized Uncle Dick, but the mountaineer sensed an air of restraint in their greeting and he knew his visit would have been more welcome at some other time; nor did he see Yellow Bear or Satanta.

As he halted in the center of the group of Indians

and dismounted, Standing Bull was at his side and placed a strong hand on his arm, announcing:

"Cut-Hand is tired. He will sleep in my lodge."

The warriors fell back, leaving a passage to one of the lodges. The Bull sought to guide Uncle Dick to this shelter, but the mountaineer shook off the hand and tersely informed them:

"Cut-Hand will talk with Yellow Bear and Satanta before he sleeps."

Pushing two warriors aside, he strode toward the lodge which he knew housed the chief.

The men glided before him to block his path, one of them declaring:

"Our friend must turn back. Yellow Bear makes new medicine."

"Then he makes war-medicine and is foolish," cried Uncle Dick.

"He makes medicine to help him catch the Pawnees who stole our ponies."

"Satanta is with him. Satanta is after the Utes who stole his ponies," sarcastically replied the mountaineer. "How long since Cut-Hand can spoil medicine that is made against thieves? I come to make medicine against the thieves—against white thieves. I will talk with Yellow Bear now."

The Indians stood irresolute but gave ground as Uncle Dick boldly advanced.

The conversation had attracted the attention of Yellow Bear, who now threw back the flap from the opening of his lodge and thrust out his scowling visage. At sight of the mountaineer the anger left

his face, but Uncle Dick knew his visit was not relished.

"My brother will come again after two sleeps, and Yellow Bear will make him a feast," said the chief.

"Cut-Hand comes to tell about two mule-loads of presents he has bought for his friends, the Arapahoes," replied Uncle Dick, advancing. "I have a talk for you and for Satanta. My medicine is strong. It told me I should find you two together."

With ill grace Yellow Bear stood aside and Uncle Dick entered the lodge. Opposite the entrance, the place of honor, sat Satanta, a deep scowl on his strong face. On both sides of him were grouped several leading men of the Arapahoes. These stared blankly at the ground, ignoring the mountaineer. Ordinarily the entrance of Wooton would have been greeted with warm informality and kindly salutations, as befitting the reception of an intimate friend. The studied silence instantly warned him that his mission was to be considered as a formal matter and aside from the claims of friendship.

Passing to the west of the lodge, Uncle Dick made to seat himself beside Satanta, but that wily diplomat, relaxing his stern features into an amiable smile, quietly shifted from the place of honor and, with a slight gesture, motioned for Wooton to be seated.

Uncle Dick bowed and dropped cross-legged on to the buffalo robe. Yellow Bear resumed his place next to the entrance. The silence continued unbroken for some minutes, the expected preface to any formal conference; then a warrior said:

"Wolf-Coming-Out has taken a wife."

This inconsequential remark was in keeping with the etiquette of indulging in trivialities before broaching serious matters. A pause followed, and then another warrior remarked:

"The cows are very fat. We shall have a bad winter."

With eyes gazing at his feet, Uncle Dick waited while bits of camp gossip were exchanged—detached and unimportant scraps of information relating to the domestic affairs of one man or the hunting prowess of another. Suddenly Satanta lifted his head and abruptly asked:

"Cut-Hand brings a talk for his Kiowa friend? Does he speak it here, or some time when we are alone?"

"I have a talk for Settainte of the Elks who sits in the second place of the Kiowa circle and who leads in giving the pipe. I have a talk for Yellow Bear of the Arapahoes. I speak so all men can hear and bring no talk to be spoken behind a bush."

His intention to speak freely before all the circle was listened to in deep silence. At last Yellow Bear said:

"The ears of the Arapahoes are open."

Uncle Dick waited a few moments and then began.

"At the lodge on the mountain are presents for the Arapahoes. Big Knife is there and shall bring them to Yellow Bear and Little Raven and their men." Then, turning to the expressionless face of Satanta, he continued: "Presents also await the Kiowas, but Set-

Uncle Dick paused and stared at the two chiefs. Yellow Bear bowed his head. Satanta was more reticent, but finally promised:

"I will make the treaty."

"Now for my affair!"

Uncle Dick briefly narrated to them the theft of the girl and the need of her immediate rescue.

"The Arapahoes shall divide. Part of them, with White Bear to play the bugle, shall ride to the mouth of the cañon. The others, under Yellow Bear, shall ride up the hills to the end of the Cañon. When the Bear plays 'charge' the bad whites will believe the soldiers are coming and will ride up the trail at the end of the Cañon. Then Yellow Bear and his men shall meet them."

"How will Cut-Hand get the medicine-woman?" eagerly asked Yellow Bear.

Uncle Dick fumbled at his chin, then explained:

"I must take my chances when they try to leave the cañon."

"The attack must be made when it is dark. The medicine-woman may be hurt by the bullets," said an Arapaho.

"I would enter the cañon, if there was a path not guarded by the thieves, and take the girl when the fighting began," said Uncle Dick.

"There is a path," quietly spoke up one of the Arapaho warriors. "With a long rope I can help Cut-Hand get down the cliff."

What had impressed Uncle Dick with being rather a forlorn hope, yet the only alternative if he would

try to rescue Miss Mary, now glittered with strong possibilities of success, and it was with great enthusiasm that he sketched out on the ground a map of the cañon and the outlaws' position therein. As he marked the location of the shack, the Arapaho man who knew the path reached forward and, with the point of his knife, indicated the spot where an unsuspected descent to the cañon floor could be made. It would bring the mountaineer nearly behind the shack.

"Now I will go to Standing Bull's lodge and sleep," cried Uncle Dick. "We will start as soon as it is dark."

"I will send two of my young men to see that the thieves do not steal away from their camp before night," said Yellow Bear.

"The Indians who came to my camp near Muddy Creek were bad Indians. They wanted to make trouble between me and Colonel Leavenworth," piously informed Satanta as Uncle Dick rose to go. "When they began to talk I made them go away. Cut-Hand can say that to Leavenworth in a talking paper."

"It shall be told him," gravely promised Uncle Dick. "Shall I say anything about a snake among the rocks?"

Satanta snapped his fingers disdainfully, saying:

"Leavenworth is a big man. His ears are not open to foolish things. One of my warriors fell asleep and tumbled off a rock and dreamed he fell on a snake that hurt his neck."

Having obtained the great Kiowa's promise to sign the treaty on Medicine-Lodge Creek, a most vital step

in averting a general uprising if the promise were kept, Uncle Dick withdrew to the lodge of the Bull. He would have been well content with the day's work if it were not for his worry concerning Miss Mary.

CHAPTER VI

SATANTA PLAYS THE BUGLE

THE last of the Arapaho scouts to return reported that up to sundown the outlaws had shown no disposition to shift their camp. Waiting until night had inked out the hollows between the foot-hills, Yellow Bear took ten warriors and departed to assault the back door of the cañon. As this detachment had the greatest distance to travel it was left for the chief to give the signal of attack—two rifle shots fired in quick succession. Uncle Dick, guided by the young brave who had declared he knew a way of descending the precipitous cliff, set forth to gain the top of the wall. Satanta and the rest of the Arapahoes rode for the mouth of the ravine, traveling leisurely, as their part of the program was considered to be the easiest of initiating.

A ride of two miles, with the Indian leading the way, brought Uncle Dick to the foot of the towering rocks. The guide was called Crooked Arm. As he was perfect in figure, however, Uncle Dick knew this must be a dream-name—one he had chosen on reaching young manhood and in some way a symbol of his personal tutelary, revealed to him while in a trance.

"You are sure you can follow the secret path in this

darkness?" anxiously asked Uncle Dick as they began the ascent.

"I know the way. I will get me a new name—a war-name to-night," fiercely assured Crooked Arm. "When I went into the mountains with my bow and arrows to get my name I passed through this cañon and found the way up over the top. It is easier to go down than up, as, at the bottom, to the height of ten men, it is very smooth and steep and one must use a rope." Hoping the young brave's ability would square up with his confidence, Uncle Dick kept at the Indian's heels, going almost entirely by the sense of touch.

When they finally gained the crest of the rock, the mountaineer threw himself on his face to regain his breath, keenly conscious of his lost youth. His companion, seemingly unaffected by the stiff climb, stole to the edge of the wall and crouched low that he might not be discerned against the starlit sky-line. His low exclamation of joy infused new life into Uncle Dick's limbs. Crawling forward the mountaineer was delighted to find his gaze resting on a blazing camp-fire almost beneath him. As he looked he caught glimpses of black figures passing back and forth through the zone of light. He knew the opaque patch near the wall was the shack.

"Do we go down here?" he asked Crooked Arm.

The Indian removed a heavy coil of rawhide from round his waist and crept along the wall a hundred feet. His sibilant signal brought Uncle Dick to his side. Taking the mountaineer's hand, he placed it on a small mound of rocks and proudly informed him:

"I put these here when I came up the path that time I went to find my name. I came up without the help of any cord, but the rawhide will help us over the place at the bottom. We must use the rawhide if we bring the medicine-woman up. Does Cut-Hand wait, or will he go down now?"

"Is there a place before we reach bottom where we can stop and wait for Yellow Bear's signal?"

"A little standing-place where I shall begin to use the rawhide."

"Then we'll go that far now," decided Uncle Dick.

With the Indian preceding him the mountaineer worked down the rough stairway composed of weathered knobs of rock and suggesting a gully worn out in ages past by some stream. The winds and rains of each season had kept the way clean of detritus, so there was small danger of their presence being betrayed by dislodged pebbles. Uncle Dick found this part of the work to be less irksome than the ascent of the other side.

As they crawled lower the sound of voices came up to meet them—at first a low murmuring, then audible words. As the voices began to take on individuality, so that one was to be distinguished from another, Crooked Arm came to a halt and seized his companion's hand.

"We can rest here," he whispered. "I will fix the end of the rawhide fast and when the signal is given we can finish very quick. I shall get me a war-name to-night."

Uncle Dick cautiously felt about with his feet and found he was standing on a shelf wide enough to sprawl

out on but not extending more than a dozen feet toward the fire. The shack stood between him and the blaze and from its outline he deduced it was larger and much more substantial than he had supposed when first viewing it from the top of the wall. As his gaze grew accustomed to the light and shadows, he saw that some fifty feet remained to be covered before he could stand on the floor of the cañon. What quickly held his interest were the irregular dark shapes along the foot of the wall, extending from a point beneath him to beyond the shack.

He touched Crooked Arm's hand and pointed to them. The Indian explained they were boulders, presumably once a part of the cliff. The lower and upper ends of the cañon were impenetrable to the gaze, the fan of light from the fire intensifying the darkness.

As the two men watched they saw a small band of horsemen ride from the fire, some going up, the others going down the cañon. After a brief period of waiting other horsemen broke through the darkness, coming from both ends of the cañon. The newcomers rode joyously into the light and loudly answered their companions' salutations with demands for food and drink.

"Changing their guards," mumbled Uncle Dick. "Well, if they don't post more men'n that they'll have the Injuns down on 'em in no time."

This possibility worried him. The success of his scheme demanded that the alarmed outlaws should ride off to hold both ends of the cañon, leaving a weak force, or none at all, to guard the shack. If too weak a resistance permitted the Indians to break through

there would be no curbing their war-lust and they would triumphantly press forward until they had the enemy hedged in around the shack. Then the outlaws, superbly armed and superb fighters battling for their lives, would doubtless turn the tables and administer an ignominious defeat.

"Wish I'd hammered it into Satanta's and the Bear's heads that they was to hold off till they'd decoyed most of the gang up to 'em," he regretted. Then he continued philosophically: "But it wouldn't 'a' done any good. Once the Injuns see 'em falling back they'll begin to *hi-yi* and show off."

The outlaws lounging around the fire betrayed no appearance of concern. At some time they had brought in a large amount of fuel from the top of the back door, where the evergreen growth commenced, and this they burned lavishly, suggesting to Uncle Dick that the band did not expect to camp in that spot many times. It was also patent that they depended entirely upon the guards stationed at the ends of the cañon to protect them from a surprise attack, that they never dreamed of any danger coming over the cliffs. Their attitude was that of careless ease and complete relaxation as they lay about the fire, many with their belts of weapons thrown aside, eating, drinking and playing cards.

This confidence and the string of boulders along the foot of the cliff inspired Uncle Dick with a new ambition. Although the rescue of the girl was the all-important purpose of the night's venture, he was extremely curious to learn something definite as to the robbers' identity. None of the gang wore masks, and during his

watching he had seen no horsemen ride near the boulders. Invariably they rode in the middle of the cañon. His decision was abruptly made. Turning to Crooked Arm, he announced:

"Cut-Hand will go down among the rocks and listen to the men talking. Remain here until the signal is fired by Yellow Bear, then, softly as a snake, come to me. You shall count a warrior's coup without making a sound."

The Indian was opposed to this, preferring that the white man stay on the shelf while he did the reconnoitering. Uncle Dick overrode his inclination, knowing full well the hot blood-lusting for a warrior's honors would surely spoil the whole scheme by some premature bit of reckless daring. Armed only with a revolver and knife, the mountaineer seized the rope and began easing himself down. For practically all the way he was able to assist himself with his feet against the cliff. As he came to a halt in the darkness at the foot of the steep rock he realized it would be no easy matter to get Miss Mary up to the shelf.

Putting that trouble aside until he should come to it, he dropped behind a boulder and studied the shack. It showed no lights, nor could he detect any signs of occupancy. Suddenly a fear that the girl had been spirited away by the gang's leader assailed him, and, with the old cunning which had placed him next to Kit Carson in mountain-craft, he swiftly worked along the cliff.

Midway between the line of rawhide and the shack his advance was halted by the coming of two horsemen

from down the cañon. Contrary to what he had observed, these two swerved in close to the boulders. Uncle Dick remained motionless. The horse nearest him plunged and reared, and a man laughed boisterously. They were abreast of him and, as the rider of the frightened animal cursed and reined him closer to the rocks, Uncle Dick made ready to shoot, fearing he was about to be discovered. The man who had laughed counseled:

"If ye don't want to bust yer nag's legs ye'd better keep clear of that clutter. Them rocks is thicker'n plums in a puddin'."

With an oath the other spurred his horse recklessly ahead, his stirrup grazing a rock, and reined in behind the shack. Here he remained for a few moments as if listening for some sound within; then the two rounded the structure and joined the camp-circle.

Uncle Dick resumed his journey and was close to the shack when a light twinkled a dozen feet ahead and he heard a woman's low voice demanding:

"What do you want in here?"

"I want to talk. Put that light out!" replied a coarse voice.

"Your leader promised I shouldn't be molested. Go out at once or I'll call for help."

Uncle Dick fingered his revolver and edged nearer. The light was that of a candle. The girl's voice was Miss Mary's. Even though deeply agitated at the thought of her being in peril from the ruffian's visit, he did not miss a new quality in her voice. He would have expected a pitiable fear to be registered; instead

she spoke firmly and with no trace of weakness. A few days before she could not endure the sight of a stage-coach; and now she faced and gave commands to an outlaw. Uncle Dick began to believe the ascent of the cliff would not be so difficult for her after all.

Near the top of the shack was a small opening that served as a window. Uncle Dick rose to his feet to peer through this, but the risk was too great. The only alternative was to crawl across the open space and spy through the crevice. He would have dared this, had not one of the men by the fire wandered toward the end of the shack.

Dropping to cover, Uncle Dick heard the man inside the shack gruffly remonstrate.

"I tell ye I must talk with ye. It's for yer own good."

"I'll call for help in three seconds if you're not gone. If your leader has any authority over you he won't approve of your coming in here," was the reply.

"Keep yer yap closed. I'll go outside an' talk through the winder," growled the man. "I'm tryin' to show ye how ye can git clear of this gang an' go back to yer friends, if ye'll let me. Of course if ye make a row I can't do nothin' to help ye."

That the girl was somewhat favorably impressed by this speech was indicated by the bit of silence that ensued. When she spoke it was to say:

"If you'll go outside I'll listen. You can talk through the window."

"An' ye'll douse that glim so I won't be all lit up?"

"I'll put it out when you come to the window."

The sound of the door softly closing and being bolted was soon followed by the cautious steps of the man rounding the corner of the shack. From the fire came a medley of curses, laughter and snatches of song, as the gang ate, drank and gambled. Uncle Dick seized his revolver and held it as a club. The man was now at the window and standing on a fragment of rock. The light inside vanished. By taking two steps ahead the mountaineer could have felled the outlaw.

"Now I'll hear what you have to say about getting me out of here," came the girl's low voice.

"Ye know somethin' I want to know. Tell me that an' I'll snake ye clear an' put ye back on top of Raton Pass. Will ye trade?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Where did ye pick up them two little gold nuggets?"

The query came in a whisper and it revealed the feverish avarice of the man's soul.

"I've already been asked that by your leader. He promised to set me free if I'd tell him," was the weary answer.

"Hell!" exploded the outlaw under his breath. "So he's huntin' the trail already. Listen to me! He's crooked. I'm bad, but I play straight when I give my word. He never plans to keep his word. Ye can't trust him. Tell me now an' I'll fetch two hosses an' pretend I'm goin' to relieve the guard. The gang's busy with the cards an' the bottle. At th' mouth of th' cañon I'll give the word an', afore they know it,

we'll be outside an' ridin' for Raton Pass. Afore mornin' I'll have ye back home with that old sucker at the toll-gate."

Uncle Dick gritted his teeth at this contemptuous characterization and his fingers itched to swing the revolver against the fellow's skull. The girl was saying:

"It's no use. Your leader knows I've forgot where or how I found any gold—if I found any. I haven't seen any gold. None was found on me when I went to the station in the pass."

"That forgittin' business sounds fishy," warned the outlaw. "I'm givin' ye a chance. Ye never can go for the gold yerself. If ye tell the boss ye won't ever git a chance to yip to any one else. He'll see to that. Calls himself Gentleman Ralph. He's th' devil. Know who he is?" He paused and laughed deep in his throat. "I should say ye don't. There's few that does but I happen to be one of the few. Think a feller like him is goin' to take a chance on a woman's gittin' loose to blab on him? Now I'm rough; but all I'm after is the gold. I ain't got any eye for a woman. Ralph has."

He waited for the sinister warning to sink in. Uncle Dick could hear the girl catch her breath as she fought back her hysterical fear. Her voice was scarcely audible as she said:

"If I knew where I found the gold—if I ever did find any—I'd tell you, tell any one gladly who would get me out of this horrible place. Don't you understand that I've lost my memory? I don't even know

who I am. I was hurt or frightened. I remember nothing of anything that happened before coming to my senses at the toll-house."

Never having heard of amnesia it was difficult for the outlaw to credit this statement.

"See here," he coaxed, "ye're afeared to trust me, but I was one of the two men what took yer to the toll-house. I done it because I couldn't be cruel to a woman. Ye had bumped yer head, that I know. Ye didn't know nothin' when me 'n' another feller took ye there. I risked my neck to git ye where that old cuss of a Wooton could fix ye up. Now ye're well ag'in, ye can thank me. An' a well person don't go round without rememberin' things. Tell me an' go scot free; or refuse an' Gentleman Ralph will git ye and yer gold."

"It's no use," sighed the girl. "To save my life I couldn't tell you what I don't know."

"Ye can't never make Gentleman Ralph believe that," growled the outlaw who, according to his statement that he had helped to carry the girl to the station, must be Chuckle-Luck.

"I think he does believe it," she slowly answered.

"Then he'll keep ye cooped up till ye git yer brains back," snarled the outlaw. "In a day or so ye'll be keen to git clear of us, but there won't be any more chances like to-night. He ain't here now, and the trick can't be worked once he rides in."

"I can't tell what I don't know," she repeated dully.

Uncle Dick heard the outlaw grind his teeth in impotent rage. Suddenly he chuckled as one inspired, and he hissed:

"Couldn't ye remember an' tell me if it was to save the life of old Wooton?"

With a little cry the girl gasped:

"That would be too evil, even for men like you!"

"To save his life?" fiercely insisted the outlaw.

"God save me! I'd—I'd try," she moaned.

"His life for the gold?" he harshly persisted. "Yes or no!"

"Yes."

"I reckon I've brought back yer mem'ry to ye," exulted the outlaw. "Now ye can spit it out."

"When you've taken me to Mr. Wooton I'll tell you—not before," she slowly answered.

Chuckle-Luck demanded the secret then and there, but she remained obdurate.

"I don't trust you an inch," she insisted. "Get me out of here and I'll tell."

Realizing he was wasting his time, he sullenly promised.

"All right. I'm game. I'll go an' fetch two hosses. May take some minutes to fool the gang, but I'm comin', never worry."

Uncle Dick writhed as he heard the outlaw cautiously withdrawing. Only by a mighty effort did he manage to hold himself back.

"Old Wooton, is it?" he thought. "Huh! I'll cut out that dog's heart for what he said to her and about me. Lord! But didn't she lie like a good one when she thought I was in danger!"

But now a new act in the little drama was unfolding. Chuckle-Luck, on returning to the light of the camp-

fire, began to appreciate the magnitude of the task before him. The men were at ease, but for him to secure two horses and get the girl out of the shack without being seen seemed impossible. Consequently he was in a vile humor when one of his mates called out:

"Here's Chuckle-Luck now. Come an' try yer luck, Chuckle. I can clean ye out."

"Go to hell!" growled Chuckle-Luck, making to pass the party of gamesters.

The one who had invited him to sit in reached out and grabbed his leg, insisting:

"Mebbe I shall but I'm goin' to trim ye first."

With a bellow of rage Chuckle-Luck drew back his foot and kicked the man in the side. The fellow instantly sprang to his feet, his face gray with anger at the unexpected assault.

"Kick me, will ye, ye low-down dog!" he roared, jumping forward with a long knife in his hand.

Chuckle-Luck seemed to welcome this vent to his sullen rage and at once prepared to fight by yanking a knife from his belt of revolvers.

With a whoop of delight the gang jumped to their feet, one crying out:

"Make it a good one! Over the handkerchief!"

"That's th' talk! Over the hanker!"

There was a cold-bloodedness about the proposal that caused the man who had been kicked to draw back a trifle. His hesitancy was almost imperceptible, but Chuckle-Luck detected it and gloated:

"Over the hanker it is. Stand to yer medicine, yer yaller dog. I'm goin' to cut yer throat!"

"I'll have somethin' to say about that, damn yer eyes!" yelled the other, now committed to the gruesome contest beyond any possibility of retreating.

Exuberant at the prospects of the bloody sport the men tied two handkerchiefs together and made them fast to two picket-pins. The latter were driven into the rocky soil. On each side parallel with and a scant three feet back of the handkerchiefs, a line was drawn on the ground. Then one of the men announced:

"Ye both know the rules. Keep between the line an' the hanker. Firelight seems right for both sides. Take yer places."

Chuckle-Luck rolled up his right sleeve in a businesslike manner and, grasping his bowie-knife, advanced till the handkerchief brushed against him.

"Now, ye dog, let's see you make me budge from this spot. Hop over that line! Hump yerself! I'm waiting' to fill yer boots with blood. Come up here or I'll take after ye an' slice ye into little bits of pieces."

This unexpected situation brought Uncle Dick to his feet, a great hope swelling his heart. So preoccupied were the outlaws that he believed he could get the girl out of the shack, to the rope and up the cliff before the gang could interfere. He advanced boldly to the back of the shack and was about to whisper her name through the window when she spoiled his plan by screaming at the top of her voice.

If her outcry destroyed her chances of escape it saved Chuckle-Luck's adversary from a terrible death, for it stayed Chuckle-Luck's first thrust, when he had his opponent's life at the point of his knife, and, in the

slight pause, a lone rider galloped furiously out of the darkness.

Uncle Dick dove back behind the boulder. The newcomer wore a long black cloak and a black mask. He spurred his horse between the dazed duelists, striking a gloved hand into the face of each, and instantly swung his animal about on its hind legs. As he faced the startled group it was with a revolver in each hand. He fired, and Chuckle-Luck yelped and dropped his shattered knife, his arm tingling. A second shot and the other duelist cried out as his blade was violently torn from his hand.

For a few moments the rider leaned forward, his two guns held high, his masked face slowly turning to sweep the alarmed faces raised to meet his gaze. When he spoke it was in a high-pitched voice, almost falsetto in its shrillness, his words coming with a whining intonation.

"You miserable curs!" he began. "You dare forget my orders and fight among yourselves! You dare frighten that young lady by brawling within her hearing! Chuckle-Luck, come here! Come nearer!"

Chuckle-Luck, his arm benumbed by the shock of the heavy bullet against his broad blade, gaped in fear at his master but slowly advanced, sidling along as though striving to hold himself back, yet impelled to go forward. The gang looked on in tense expectation, horrified and yet fascinated, and none thinking to lift a hand against the cloaked figure.

At last Chuckle-Luck stood at the stirrup, breathing rapidly as if exhausted by much running, his face

twitching as he gazed into the eyes glowing through the slits in the mask. Without shifting his gaze the bandit leader tossed a revolver into the air and caught it by the barrel. Then, bending to one side to get room for the blow, he smashed the heavy butt between the shrinking eyes.

Chuckle-Luck, so ready to fight to the death over a handkerchief, dropped a senseless mass without having dared to raise a hand to guard against the blow. Something like a sigh ran through the group of men. The leader sat motionless, his gun still clasped by the barrel, and ranged his baleful gaze over the spectators, allowing his glance to dwell for a few moments on each. Then his shrill, whining voice commanded:

"Detel, step up here!"

Chuckle-Luck's opponent was something of a craven, for on hearing his sentence he began mouthing incoherent appeals, and even went through the blasphemy of clasping his hands as though praying for mercy. Like Chuckle-Luck he wore several revolvers in his belt, yet he never thought to draw one.

Gentleman Ralph spoke only the once. His fierce gaze repeated the order, however, and, after the first frenzied outburst, Detel began advancing, weeping and begging at every step. The grim figure waited, stirring not a muscle, till the man stood beside him. Then the improvised club rose and fell, and Detel dropped across the insensible Chuckle-Luck.

"Perhaps now we'll have order in this camp."

Uncle Dick fumbled with his gun, his nerves unstrung at the beastly cruelty of it all.

"Yes, that's how he bosses 'em. It takes his kind to hold such critters to the mark. But what a cold-blooded devil!"

Without further speech Gentleman Ralph rode his horse to the rear of the shack and, for a moment, the mountaineer feared he had been discovered, but the leader simply desired to reassure his prisoner. Crowding his horse against the back of the shack he looked in at the window and in a treble comforted Miss Mary:

"You won't be annoyed again, Miss No-Name."

"Oh, you brute! You brute!" piteously sobbed the girl.

"But I saved two lives. They'd have cut each other into ribbons," he reminded her.

Then he gave a little cackling laugh that had nothing human about it and added:

"They're hard—bitter hard! Only discipline of the right kind can keep them in line."

"You are worse than they! So much worse!"

"Where is there another man who can leave a beautiful woman alone with a band like mine and come back and find her unharmed?" he jeered.

She did not answer, so he continued:

"Very well, we'll pass over all that. Have you remembered things yet?"

She continued her silence and, after waiting patiently for her to speak, he warned:

"You had better make a great effort. I'm beginning to fall in love with you. Just now gold can buy me away from love, but later—I fear not. A ride into Mexico—a long honeymoon. Better remember."

Uncle Dick raised his revolver. Reason urged him to wait, to make sure of the girl's release. With thumb on the hammer he fought a mighty battle to control his honest rage. It had been given to no other to have Gentleman Ralph at the end of a gun, yet the bandit leader had spoken the truth when he boasted that only he could have left the girl with the gang and found her unharmed on his return. Uncle Dick pictured the outlaws rushing upon him if he killed their chief; pictured the girl defenseless if he should fall. He lowered his weapon.

"I'll give you an hour to prepare for a treasure-hunt or a honeymoon," said the outlaw as the girl continued silent.

With a whimpering laugh he bowed in mock gallantry, backed his horse almost against the rock behind which Uncle Dick was concealed and rode clear of the shack.

His horse was headed for the lower end of the cañon, and the mountaineer's hopes for an immediate rescue were reviving when there sounded on the still air a faint *boom, boom* from the upper end of the cañon.

With a drive of his spurs Gentleman Ralph wheeled his horse and plunged to the edge of the sullen group about the fire and raised a hand for silence. Instantly they ceased their mumbled undertones as they stared at him apprehensively and waited. Apparently they had not caught the alarm, but with their growling voices quieted, and their ears called to attention, they could not miss the sinister significance in the half a dozen shots now being fired at irregular intervals.

With a wave of his arm Gentleman Ralph yanked his horse about and shrilly commanded: "After me!"

Even as they were rushing to their horses to follow their leader, Ralph checked his mount and brought him around with his front feet sawing the air. The mellow notes of a bugle were sounding "advance" at the mouth of the cañon.

"Sojers!" bleated an outlaw, leaving his horse and dashing frantically toward the precipitous cliff.

With a frenzied spring as the cruel spurs lifted him into the air, Ralph's horse leaped across the man's path and the toe of the bandit leader's boot caught him under the chin and hurled him to the ground.

"Every man to his horse!" ordered the leader.

Chuckle-Luck, his dead senses awakened by his master's voice, crawled to his feet and stood shaking his wounded head, trying to grasp the situation. Gentleman Ralph gave an excellent exhibition of his power over the gang when he commanded:

"Chuckle-Luck, take twelve men and ride down the cañon and learn what that bugle means. The rest of you follow me up the cañon. We'll shoot our way out through the end that is the weaker. Homer, see the shack is made tight. Our prisoner mustn't get out to walk into a bullet. Chuckle will lead his men back here if he finds he's outnumbered, pick up the girl and make for the back-trail where we'll be waiting for him. If I'm beaten back I'll get the girl and make the mouth of the cañon. The girl must go with us!"

"What if we're both beaten back, or both find we ride through?" growled Chuckle-Luck.

"If we're both beaten back we'll meet here and join forces for a rush. If you find you can ride through stand them off till I can come to you. Remember, it's hanging if you're taken alive."

"Detel's coming to his senses," informed one of the gang.

"Prop him against the door of the shack. Ah, he opens his eyes. Detel, do you understand me? Stay here and don't let the girl get out. We'll be back soon. Forward!"

With his detachment at his heels he disappeared in the darkness, pounding toward the back door where the firing was increasing in volume. Chuckle-Luck, with a round of oaths, pulled his guns and led his men down the cañon. The notes of the bugle were now being punctuated by the staccato bark of rifle and revolver.

This seemed to be Uncle Dick's golden opportunity. He glided from behind the rock and suddenly bumped into a lithe figure and grappled with it, only to find his fingers gripping the greasy body of a savage. Crooked Arm's voice was gagged by a knife held between his teeth. He carried a revolver in one hand and a length of rawhide in the other. It was patent he had witnessed the departure of the band and knew that but one man was left behind to stand guard.

Uncle Dick caught him by the arm and shook him, whispering:

"He must be taken alive. He knows something I must know. Count your coup by being the first to strike him with the empty hand."

Crooked Arm put up his weapons and stole round

the shack, Uncle Dick following at his heels. The man Detel had managed to rise to his feet and was facing the fire, his mind reeling in confusion. Crooked Arm leaped upon him and bore him to the ground and counted his coup just as Uncle Dick joined him and gave a hand in using the rawhide.

"What is the matter? Who is it at that door? I am Isobel Deland—a prisoner!" cried out the girl.

"Thank God, Miss Mary—Miss Isobel, you've remembered your name!" replied Uncle Dick.

"Uncle Dick?" she tremulously queried.

"Same old cuss," he roared. "We'll have you out of there in a minute. The road-agents are attacked at both ends of the cañon. Hi! Crooked Arm! Back here behind the shack! Some of the devils are coming, chased in by Yellow Bear and his men! Miss Isobel, down on the floor. Bullets will be flying mighty soon."

Down the cañon came the thundering clatter of horses at a mad gallop. The foremost riders, with the masked leader at their head, swerved in toward the shack. Uncle Dick jumped into the flare of the fire, and the bandit leader exclaimed shrilly, raised a revolver and pulled the trigger, but the weapon was empty. As he hurled it aside and snatched another from under his cloak, Uncle Dick opened fire, causing the leader's horse to leave the ground in a terrific spring.

Crooked Arm raised the war-cry of the Arapaho and began firing wildly from the other corner of the building. Gentleman Ralph plunged across the lane of light, his men following, lying low in the saddle and

firing at the mountaineer. As they vanished down the cañon Yellow Bear and his braves raced exultingly into view. The chief was waving a ghastly trophy above his head, the sight of which caused Crooked Arm to howl most enviously. For a brief moment the Indians were to be seen and then, like their quarry, they were swallowed up by the darkness.

"He'd rather have that scalp than five thousand dollars reward!" snorted Uncle Dick, turning to the door and calling for Crooked Arm to join him.

Crooked Arm, however, had surrendered to the lust of battle. The spectacle of his chief pursuing the bandits and brandishing a scalp was too much for the young brave, and he forgot the carefully planned teamwork with the mountaineer. The opportunity to win a great name and count many coups sent him running after his fellows, howling like a fiend.

"If they'd only shut off their yelling till after it's all over we might do something," he muttered. "Now that damn' young pup has left me to get Miss Isobel up the rocks alone. Hi, honey! It's Uncle Dick. I'm coming in for to fetch you out of this hole."

She did not answer him and for a moment his heart seemed to cease beating. He feared one of the outlaws' random bullets had found its way through the flimsy shack. His trembling hand was fumbling at the heavy bar across the door, when he was horrified to behold the outlaws retreating pell-mell from down the cañon. Nor were the Arapahoes giving ground ahead of them as was to have been expected.

By some chance maneuver in the darkness at the

mouth of the cañon Chuckle-Luck's band had joined forces with the men under Gentleman Ralph, and the united body had managed to swing clear of the Arapahoes and now had an open path to the back door with all the Indians behind them. From the heart of the blackness streaks of fire advertised the rear-guard action. Satanta continued to blow his bugle, but the outlaws were no longer to be fooled by him.

Bending over Detel, the mountaineer relieved him of the two revolvers in his belt and, seating himself before the shack, began raking the head of the retreating column. He shouted hoarsely in triumph as the man in the black mask lurched forward in his saddle.

Then his fighting spirit became paralyzed as he recognized one of the two horsemen nearest him. One sat erect, bareheaded, with his arms pinioned at his side. The other, protected by the prisoner and his horse, rode low with a hand guiding the prisoner's steed.

"Oh, lord! They've got Joe Peace!" gasped Uncle Dick ceasing his fire so as not to hit his young friend.

Peace now saw him and cried out:

"Uncle Dick! Uncle Dick! They've got me! Look out for Keene!"

Before he could reply to the despairing call, Yellow Bear, at the head of his Arapahoes, tore in close to the side of the cliff and presented a barrier between the bandits and the shack. The fleeing horsemen at once swerved toward the opposite side of the cañon. From out of the darkness came a thin strident voice:

"They're only Indians, boys. Hang on to your man. The trail is clear ahead."

Uncle Dick rubbed his eyes to make sure he was not dreaming as the chase and pursuit returned to the night. Finally he exclaimed:

"Damn me! They've got Joe!"

Only one of the Indians remained with him. This was Crooked Arm, who proudly displayed a red furrow across his chest.

"I have won a war-name," he exulted. "The white men run. We will not take the medicine-woman up the cliff."

"They've snagged Joey Peace!" mumbled Uncle Dick. "He got into the cañon during the first of the fighting, and they've gone and snagged him lickety-split!"

"They will not come back! The Arapahoes are great warriors!" chanted Crooked Arm.

"Hush that chatter or I'll lambast you!" growled Uncle Dick. "I've got trouble enough without you chipping in. Oh Lord! I dasn't look! If she should be——"

He couldn't finish it. His hands shook so he could not remove the bar and Crooked Arm did it for him. As the door swung open the light from the camp-fire fed into the small room. The girl was stretched out on the floor. With a low sob of anguish Uncle Dick dropped beside her, believing her dead from a chance bullet. Then he shouted joyously as he failed to find any wound and observed that she still breathed. Knocking the curious Crooked Arm aside he rushed to Detel and pawed him over until he located a flask of whisky. Returning to the girl he forced a mouthful of the

burning liquor through her clenched teeth, and she rewarded him by choking and coughing spasmodically and at last opened her eyes.

"It's Uncle Dick, honey," he soothed as she stared wildly up into his face.

Her fear vanished and she faintly said:

"Of course—Uncle Dick—I'm Isobel Deland of Santa Fé. My uncle was taking me East. I saw——"

She put her hands to her face and began to weep.

"That's right. Have a good cry," he encouraged her. "Always do it myself when I'm upset."

"But where are they?" she whispered, her eyes distending with terror. "That man in the mask—who talks like a woman. I'm afraid of him worse than I am of death—a million deaths. If you could hear him laugh! He isn't human!"

He helped her to her feet, soothing:

"They're gone. If they manage to drive the Injuns back we'll hear the shooting and we'll go up the cliff. The road-agents don't know anything about the path, and two minutes' start is as good as a week, but I don't reckon they'll try to get back. They've got enough of fighting, thanks to my friends, the Arapahoes. I winged their boss, the cuss that gives you the shivers, but not enough to stop his yapping. If I'd killed him it would have been the best job I ever done."

"If you had seen and heard what I have!" she sobbed, leaning against him for support.

He sought to comfort her by reminding: "Yet some good came of it, so long as it made you remember things."

"I remember all," she sadly answered. "I'll tell you about it some time. I'm too ashamed to tell it now."

"Reckon I know," he murmured, stroking her disheveled hair. "Your uncle was a weak man rather than a bad man. He was led into it. I was with him when he died. Yes, my dear, he's dead—died happy to know you was with me. I was behind the shack when that brute Chuckle-Luck teased you to tell about the gold. I was there when Ralph asked you if you remembered things."

"So long as he believed I had lost my memory I knew it gave me an advantage. If I told him he'd have no further use for me."

"Yet you was willing to tell when Chuckle-Luck threatened my old hide. Reckon I won't never forget that. And I'm mighty glad the worst is known and is over, and that you've got your mem'ry back."

"It came back to me all at once when they stopped the stage-coach down the pass and took me out. They had one torch burning and I saw them with their masks on. I remembered then how I rode my horse out on a shelf of rock and watched them rob a coach. Till I saw that, I thought they were traders banded together by fear of the Indians. They had left me behind in their hiding-place. I found some gold—and something else—something that frightened me. I forgot uncle's orders to stay there and tried to overtake them. I followed a trail up into the hills.

"The first I knew I was out on a platform of rock. I saw them below me and was pleased. I was about to call out to them, to make signals, when they hurried

into the woods. Then I was terribly frightened, thinking the Indians were coming. I had seen my uncle among them—and the man called Chuckle-Luck and the man called Charlie. Then, to my relief, a stage-coach, not Indians, came up the road. To my horror my uncle and his friends poured out of the woods, all wearing something over their faces—then the robbery."

"I knew it was like that," he comforted. "Was this critter of a Ralph with them?"

"Never while I was with them. If I'd heard his voice I should always have remembered it."

"When you found the nuggets you found something else that scared you?"

She nodded.

"Dead men's bones?" he prompted.

Again she nodded.

"In the pitcher you made you said the bones ought to be where it was dark," he prompted.

"It was a deep opening under the cliff, as if the river at some time had gouged it out. At the back of this opening was a crack in the wall that led into a cave. It was in there I found them—the nuggets and the bones."

"You could find the place again?"

"I never want to. It was too terrible. It was on the river, the Purgatory they called it. At least some called it that. Others called it the Picketwire. Perhaps you can find it. If you do I hope there is lots of gold and that it will bring you luck."

"Not so fast, young lady. I'm too old to turn gold-hunter on my own hook. If any gold is laying round

loose in a cave on the Purgatory it's yours by right of discovery. If I can locate it it must be yours."

Crooked Arm thrust his head through the door and said:

"Cut-Hand come."

"Who is with you besides the Indians?" she asked. "Is Mr. Peace, or Mr. Keene?"

"No, no," he hurriedly replied. "Both started to hunt for you, but we got separated. Hi! What is it now?"

The last was spoken as Crooked Arm's head reappeared.

"Many horses coming—the fighting is over."

"By Hen, that don't sound like it!" cried Uncle Dick leaping through the door with both guns down, as he heard the yelling and shooting up the cañon. "Get the medicine-woman back to the path. I'll follow you. Miss Isobel, we've got to do some climbing, but we have plenty of time and there's no danger."

"I'm not afraid now," she responded quietly.

"Path no good," said Crooked Arm. "Yellow Bear and the Arapahoes fire guns in the air. When we go back to our big village we will set fire to the grass to tell the women that we have scalps."

"Shut up!" hissed Uncle Dick.

Crooked Arm's words proved true, however, for within a few minutes the Arapahoes, chanting and yowling, galloped up to the camp-fire, waving two scalps, alternately rejoicing and mourning for their three empty saddles. As all the fighting had been carried on while both sides were riding furiously and

masked by the darkness, the casualties had been light. Still, in addition to the two outlaws killed outright, several were supposed to have been severely wounded, in addition to the injury done the leader by Uncle Dick's bullet. With the exception of the two slain and scalped the outlaws carried all their men from the cañon.

Satanta reined in in front of the shack, a devil's mood reflected in his savage face. He was still incensed at Uncle Dick's interference with his scheme for a wide alliance of plains tribes in a mighty campaign against the whites. His part in the night's business had practically been forced upon him because of his fear of Colonel Leavenworth, who by this time must have received Wooton's talking paper, betraying the scheme. Could his sympathies have had full play they would have been with the bandits, who at least warred on white men. Being one of the most astute dissemblers ever produced by an Indian nation he had endeavored to conceal his true feelings and play his part realistically. Committed to the fray, he philosophically decided that a bandit's scalp was next best to taking an immigrant's or a soldier's scalp, but now the fighting was over he was enraged to know he had not counted a coup.

Seeking an outlet for some of his venom his gaze wandered to Detel.

"The Arapahoes shout and make ready to dance two scalps, while three of their warriors are missing. Yellow Bear must take another scalp before he can count coups with the white men."

The prisoner did not understand a word spoken, but he correctly interpreted the evil glance and the tone

of the chief's sneering voice. Twisting his head he caught Uncle Dick's eye and hoarsely begged:

"Save me from the torture, boss! Don't let them devils play with me! Promise to shoot me first!"

"You shall not be tortured. I'll shoot you first," replied Uncle Dick, working through the now silent throng of Arapahoes.

"After Yellow Bear has roasted that white man and danced his scalp he can dance and sing," continued Satanta. "The medicine of his tribe will be angry if he lets the trade stand three for two."

The shouting was hushed. Yellow Bear gazed gloomily over his circle of braves. Economy of man-power was ever the essence of Indian strategy in warfare. Many a large war-party has been successfully withstood by a smaller number of men, because the leader of the attacking force was not willing to pay a certain minimum price for a complete victory. To lose three warriors in a running fight and kill only two of the foes was in no sense a triumph.

"If my friend Settainte had not called out his name, but had kept still after blowing the bugle, we would have killed more of the whites," Yellow Bear bitterly retorted.

"The name of Settainte is big medicine. When I shouted it the white men ran," tersely replied the Kiowa chief.

"Some of the white men were wounded and may die," spoke up Uncle Dick. "Their friends took them away."

"A warrior counts only the coups he knows he has

made," sneered the Kiowa, looking at the prisoner.

"Damn his snake eyes! Make him keep 'em off'n me, boss!" yelped Detel.

Yellow Bear sank his head and pondered on Satanta's scornful words. Gradually he swung his gaze about until it rested on the terrified countenance of Detel. The man was his enemy. The Arapahoes had come to the cañon with Cut-Hand for the express purpose of killing off the bad whites. The mountaineer had declared them to be bad flesh. White men offered much money for their dead bodies. Whether a dead man wore his hair or not, seemed immaterial, but to affront the tribal medicine was disastrous. He straightened and, staring at Satanta, announced:

"The Arapahoes will roast that man. Settainte is welcome to watch."

The Kiowa did not miss the slur in this speech to the effect he had no part in the proceedings except that of an onlooker. The dark face grew convulsed with rage; then smoothed out as he mastered himself, and his voice was bland as he rejoined:

"Yellow Bear is a great warrior. When he loses three braves in a surprise attack he sends three of his enemies after them. The White Bear will watch and learn from the Yellow Bear how a white man should be roasted."

"What they sayin', boss?" babbled Detel. "They're reckonin' to play me dirt, boss. I'm plumb skeered. Don't let them prod me with their damn' knives."

"Hush your noise! Show some spunk!" commanded Uncle Dick. Then he turned to Yellow Bear.

"This man is my prisoner. He knows something I want to know. He must not be roasted. He will be turned over to the Long Knives and hung. The Arapahoes shall receive a wagon-load of presents for him. They shall make many feasts for their tribal medicine. The Turtle, the Ear of Corn and the Flat Pipe all of stone, shall be much pleased with the feasts."

While tempted by the prospects of many presents, Uncle Dick's declaration stung the Yellow Bear's self-respect. Satanta was laughing inwardly to see him dictated to by one white man. Then again his Indian mind could not perceive any justice in allowing soldiers to kill a man they had no part in capturing. The Arapahoes had done the fighting and had lost three men. It was an affront to his logic and his conception of fair play. Yet Cut-Hand was a mighty power with the Arapahoes, and Yellow Bear sought to soften his own insistence by asking:

"Cut-Hand has one prisoner, the medicine-woman. How can he claim the white man?"

"Because he is my prisoner. Because he knows something I want to know," bluntly answered Uncle Dick.

"But he shall tell all he knows over the fire," protested Yellow Bear.

"He will talk very much," spoke up Satanta.

"The chief of the Kiowas is angry because he did not count a coup," shot back Uncle Dick.

Satanta scowled murderously, remembered himself and shifted his expression to one of mild reproach. His voice was unruffled as he commented:

"The Kiowas do not let white men tell them what they shall do with their prisoners."

"The Arapahoes are old friends of Cut-Hand. He has never lied to them. They will do more for him than the Kiowas would. Colonel Leavenworth will tell Settainte what he shall do with his prisoners and Settainte will listen and obey."

Satanta turned away his head until he could control his facial expression. The Arapahoes were quick to note how truly the shot had scored. Yellow Bear hesitated. The friendship between the mountaineer and his people was something sacred. Uncle Dick might have carried his point, because of the Arapahoes' great love for him, had not Crooked Arm at that moment become a victim to ambition. Swelling with importance and irritating the wound on his chest to a more frightful appearance, he proudly informed:

"The white man is my prisoner. I counted coup by being the first to touch him with my bare hand."

Satanta laughed mockingly. Yellow Bear's eyes lighted in triumph.

"Ugh!" he exploded. "What does Cut-Hand say to that?"

Uncle Dick bit his lip. It was true he had permitted his young companion to count his coup by touching the outlaw first; this had been done to aid him in winning a war-name. His hold on the Arapahoes was centered in their firm belief that he would never deceive them.

"Crooked Arm did touch him first," he promptly admitted. "The white man was like one dead. I left

him without touching him, in order to give Crooked Arm a chance to count his coup. Crooked Arm is a brave man. The white man is prisoner of the Arapahoes."

"Then Cut-Hand has nothing to say if my friend, Yellow Bear, teaches the White Bear how to roast a white man," taunted Satanta.

"They mean p'izen, boss. Gimme a bullet first," whispered Detel.

"Never have the Arapahoes asked anything of me without getting it," gravely continued Uncle Dick, catching and holding Yellow Bear's gaze. "Never has Cut-Hand asked anything of the Arapahoes but what it was gladly given to him. If I now ask for Yellow Bear's ponies I will find them waiting for me at my lodge on the mountain. The Bear can ask for anything of mine and it will be left at his lodge.

"Now I ask for this white man. Give him to me and he will be punished. In return for him you shall get many guns. I promise it. You shall get many goods for your women. I promise it. If the Kiowa laughs at you for not building a fire under this man, ask him where his presents are? Where is the bright cloth your women love? This man is worth many ponies, many guns, many bales of cloth, if you do not burn him. The Arapahoes would be fools to burn up many ponies and cloth and guns. Even the Kiowa would not do that. He would make a trade."

As Wooton ceased, Yellow Bear turned on his heel and made a gesture for several of his leading men to join him. Crooked Arm was called into the con-

ference and went, swollen with great pride. Uncle Dick knew their decision must stand. If the verdict were against Detel, then the girl must be removed before she guessed the truth.

At first Uncle Dick believed he had won, but Satanta's mocking gaze and contemptuous smile aroused the devil in Yellow Bear. Detel seemed to sense that the decision was going against him.

"Help me, boss," he whispered. "I know things ye want to know. I know things that'll make it worth yer while to listen to. I know who Gentleman Ralph is." His voice suddenly rose in volume as his terror flogged him on. "I know who he is, damn his eyes! Git me out of this an' turn me over to the sojers an' I'll split."

The Indians filed back. In a last effort Detel yelled:

"Keep 'em off, boss! I'll tell who Gentleman Ralph is!"

A rifle cracked a hundred feet away, and Detel's body jerked convulsively as the heavy bullet smashed through his heart.

For a few seconds there was a tense tableau; then came a shrill mocking laugh, the glimpse of a shadowy figure and the sound of fleet hoofs. With howls of rage the Indians fired after the retreating figure and then ran to their horses to give chase.

"Poor devil!" muttered Uncle Dick. "Reckon it was best that way, even if I didn't learn what I'd give a jug to know. To take his confession and not save him from the torture would have been bad medicine.

To have shot him would 'a' been a nasty business. I know that Yellow Bear, for the first time in his life, was going to refuse me something. Little Raven would have given in."

Satanta crouched by the fire, making no offer to join in the pursuit. When the Arapahoes up the cañon gave voice to their rage—sufficient testimony that they had lost their quarry—the Kiowa rose and, leaping on his pony, galloped down the cañon at top speed.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE HAPPY FORTUNE

ENTERING the shack, Uncle Dick found the girl crouching in one corner, her fingers to her ears. She had understood nothing of the debate over Detel's fate, but she had heard his pleading to be saved from the torture, the shot which ended his life and the high-pitched, mocking laugh.

"Well, young woman, it's all over. We can go home," faltered Uncle Dick.

"I heard that poor wretch begging. He is quiet now. Have the Indians got him?" she whispered.

"He wasn't tortured—died without pain. Best way out of it, as otherwise he'd have been hung. We'll start for home in a minute. Wait for me here."

He passed out and closed the door after him. The Arapahoes were standing around the dead outlaw, muttering guttural expressions of rage. Uncle Dick joined them and at once learned the cause of their anger. Detel had been scalped. Snatching up a blanket, he threw it over the body to conceal the gory spectacle from the girl when she left the shack. In Arapaho he asked:

"How is this? Do my brothers scalp a man shot by an enemy?"

"Settainte did it while we were shooting at the man who keeps his face covered," was the bitter reply. "He stole that scalp. That is why he went away so quick."

"My Arapaho brothers will do well to make no bargains with the Kiowas. They are without honor," counseled the mountaineer.

"White Bear will find his coup is filled with bad medicine," declared Yellow Bear.

"Cover the body with rocks," ordered Uncle Dick. "It is not for white women to see. There are presents at my lodge on top of the mountain. How many ride with me?"

"I will send some of my men to bring our teepees near the mouth of the pass. The rest will ride with you," said Yellow Bear.

Dispatching Crooked Arm to bring up his horse, Uncle Dick borrowed two ponies from the chief. Then calling Miss Isobel from the shack, he placed her on a pony and rode beside her. The Arapahoes scurried ahead and also guarded the rear.

At the mouth of the cañon the band halted and dismounted excepting the few the chief directed to bring up the camp equipage. Crooked Arm had already gone over the cliff and would join them at sunrise, bringing his and the mountaineer's animals.

Although urged to sleep by Uncle Dick, the girl's nerves were too taut to relax just then. The knowledge that she was safe seemed to overwhelm her at first,

and she showed no desire to talk; nor was Uncle Dick in a loquacious mood. He was much perturbed over Joe Peace. It seemed to be the working of an ironically cruel fate that, just as the old mountain man should effect the release of one of his young friends, another should become the outlaw's prey. And what new discovery did Peace's warning against Keene indicate?

His fruitless cogitations were broken by Miss Isobel's frank admission.

"Now I will talk. It's about the gold."

"S'pose we pass it over," gently suggested Uncle Dick. "Let's talk about pleasant things."

"No. I must tell it before my memory slips away from me again," she persisted.

"That will never happen. You can't ever be shocked any worse than you have been to-night. You've stood the last and hardest test mighty well."

"Then it will always be in my mind. Perhaps if I tell what little I know it will be easier for me."

Uncle Dick decided this was sound logic and nodded for her to begin, so drawing the blanket closer to her shoulders, she snuggled up to him.

"My father left the East for California in 1855, taking me with him. My mother had died when I was an infant, and there was nothing to keep him back East. His brother, who had gone to the coast two years earlier, wrote and urged him to come and make a fortune. Father seemed to have no ambitions, probably because of the loss of my mother, but the thought of winning a fortune for me decided him to make the

trip. I was eleven years old at the time. We went by way of the isthmus. I was placed in a mission school selected by my uncle, and kept there until my father died, when I was sixteen.

"It was then that my uncle became my guardian. He placed me with a family in Sacramento where I lived happily for two years, while he worked in the mines. Sometimes he would have considerable gold; then again we would be very poor. He always paid my way, however. After the two years I was shifted about quite frequently until, a year ago, he suddenly decided to return to the States.

"We came to Santa Fé with a wagon-train, but instead of pushing on we remained there. I soon suspected my uncle was in bad company. He was not bad at heart and was always good to me, but he could not endure the thought of returning east as poor as when he left. It became a mania with him to get gold enough to finish his days in decent comfort and leave me enough to live on. He tried gambling, hoping to make a fortune overnight. I remember when he came home one morning flushed with success. He had won twenty thousand dollars and we were to start at once for the States, but fate was against us. We had to wait a bit and he went back and lost all his money. After that he seemed to lose his lust for gambling and would sit for hours, silent and miserable.

"Then happened the incidents which were never clear to me until I sat on my horse and saw him helping to rob a stage-coach. It began with his acquaintance with a man he called Charlie, a man his own age

with a whimsical face which was always laughing. I suspected nothing when he told me we were to go east under the protection of a large band of traders.

"We traveled through Raton Pass, going through your gate at night. I rode a horse and was muffled in a blanket, as my uncle did not want any one to know I was a woman. There were three of us, he and the man called Charlie and myself."

"You were the three that wouldn't come in and eat," broke in Uncle Dick. "It was about three weeks ago."

She nodded and resumed:

"Nothing out of the ordinary happened until we stopped at a river, Le Purgatoire. I was surprised that my uncle and Charlie should decide to remain there until the other traders joined them, for it was a wild, desolate spot. Charlie pretended to discover the opening under the rocks. I know now that it must have been used by the outlaws many times. We had brought three pack-animals loaded with provisions and ammunition, and we lived comfortably while waiting for the supposed traders to join us. They came in, two or three at a time, and either Charlie or uncle always hastened to meet them, probably to explain the deception being played upon me.

"Some of the men treated me courteously, while others seemed offended because I was there, and the man called Chuckle-Luck growled much about 'a petticoat being mixed in business.' I thought nothing of that. It was natural they shouldn't want to be bothered with a woman while passing through the Indian coun-

try, but to get away from them I used to ride my pony clear of the cañon and wander along the banks.

"One day, however, an Indian chased me and I was badly frightened. I escaped back into the cañon and met two of the men and told them what had happened. They rode on and I heard shots. When they returned they said the Indian had escaped, that I mustn't go out alone any more. After that they were absent a few at a time, and at nights some of them would be counting money. I couldn't understand what we were waiting for, as there was a round score of them when all happened to be present. Several times I asked my uncle why we didn't start for the East, but he would answer something about the Indians and promise me we should go very soon.

"I've spoken of the day I was left alone and explored the recess where we camped. It's a short distance beyond a twisted pine that grows on the river bank. At first when I found the crack or crevice in the rear wall I thought nothing of it. Then, being curious, I got a splinter of pine for a torch and examined the narrow opening more closely. Passing my torch through, I discovered the opening led into a chamber. None of the band had ever noticed it, I am positive. It was in the thick shadows and, if one saw it, one would think it was only a crack in the solid rock.

"I slipped through the opening and there at my feet, saw the two nuggets. I had been in California long enough to know that gold specimens weren't likely to be found on the floor of a cave in that fashion, and I preserved them. Advancing deeper into the cave,

I was frightened to find it was apparently a charnel-house. One end seemed filled with bones, but I gave them only a glance and fled back through the opening. I was convinced it was an ancient burial-place of the Indians. No good would come of telling the men, as some of them, including my uncle, were superstitious, so I kept still about it; but I didn't like to remain in the place alone.

"At first it didn't bother me; then I began to fancy I could hear some one moving round in there. I knew it was absurd, yet it worked on my nerves until I couldn't endure it. So one day when the men began bustling about to go on some errand, I made up my mind to follow them—not to spy on them, for I didn't suspect that anything was wrong. I wanted to be near them. Then followed my ride out on the shelf of rock and my discovery that they were robbers."

"You made a mighty good picture of that cañon—when you was forgetful," mused Uncle Dick.

"I sketched it several times before the Indian chased me. It's a wild spot. The stunted pine near our shelter under the rocks always suggested to me an evil guardian of the place. I used to imagine the crooked arms were waving me back. I've been in many rough places in the mountains, but never where the very atmosphere seemed to warn one away, as it did there."

"You never, while with the outlaws, saw any one you believe to be this chap in the black mask?"

"Never. I'm positive of that. If he commanded the band he did it through a messenger."

Crooked Arm now arrived with the mountaineer's horse. Uncle Dick sprang to his feet and, pointing to the kindling east, said:

"My brothers, we can start now."

In single file the cavalcade traveled to the mouth of the pass. Reaction was now telling on Miss Isobel. Uncle Dick observed her swaying in the saddle, so he rode beside her and supported her with his arm.

"I'm tired," she faintly confessed, trying to smile.

Now that he was likely to meet white men, Yellow Bear concealed the outlaw's scalp which he had been flaunting on his bridle. Crooked Arm reluctantly drew a blanket over his blood-smeared chest. Half-way up the road the travelers met a small freight-train which displayed symptoms of a panic until Uncle Dick rode ahead and vouched for his companions.

"We know it's all right, long as ye're with 'em, Wooton," replied the leader, a grizzly veteran. "We traveled all night so's we could have a full day on quitting this end of the pass. Ye got a sick man up to your place. Some of yer men fetched him in from the road jest as we passed through the gate."

"A sick man?" repeated Uncle Dick.

"Wal, I reckon he'd been shot up by somebody. The Injun squaw seemed to know him. We was in a hustle to get along an' didn't stick to learn nothin'. Sure them cusses behind ye won't sneak after us?"

"They're my friends," said Uncle Dick.

"That makes 'em all right, but I never see a Injun yet but what I had a sneakin' suspicion that he'd got a scalp or two hid on him somewhere."

Uncle Dick suppressed a smile as he wondered what the freighter would say and believe if he could glance under Yellow Bear's blanket.

"None of the Arapahoes will harm you. Down below you may strike Satanta and some of his Kiowas, but they're few in numbers. Cuss them out and keep up a bold front, and they won't fuss with you any."

Falling back beside the girl, he began to speculate on who the sick man could be. Some one the Quail knew, he finally decided. As Miss Isobel had been hard put to it to keep awake while her guardian conferred with the freighter, she had heard nothing of their conversation, so Uncle Dick deemed it wise to say nothing about the sick or wounded man until he had investigated.

When they came up to the gate, the Mexican attendant gave a yell on seeing the Indians and would have bolted, had he not heard Uncle Dick's stentorian voice ordering him back. Recognizing his employer, the Mexican hurriedly raised the gate, cowering beneath the cold gaze of Yellow Bear

The Quail came waddling from the cook-house, ignoring her people in her zeal to reach the girl.

"Preety," she cried, lifting the drowsy Isobel from the pony and patting her cheek, but there was nothing in the Quail's deportment that would lead a stranger to infer that Miss Isobel had been stolen and had unexpectedly returned.

"The Quail will say nothing about the wounded man brought here," commanded Uncle Dick. "The medicine-woman has had no sleep since she was stolen.

Get her to bed at once. Give her food when she wakes up."

Turning to Yellow Bear, he pointed to the cook-house, saying:

"Camp back of that. My people will bring you food. Here is Big Knife. He will bring presents to you."

Big Knife, smoking some of his patron's tobacco and looking exceedingly well-fed, ambled forward. Receiving Uncle Dick's orders concerning the two mule-loads of trade-goods left by Keene, he started for the shed back of the corral. Uncle Dick hurried into the house.

The Arapaho woman was busy with her charge in the latter's room. Uncle Dick passed to a guest-room and peeped in. A man was stretched on the cot, slumbering heavily. Tiptoeing to his side, Uncle Dick gave a glance at the haggard face and exclaimed aloud:

"By Hen! If it ain't Joe Peace! Why—why, Joe, how did you work it?"

Peace opened his eyes and for a moment stared at the mountaineer without seeming to recognize him. Then he cried:

"Where is Miss Mary? Is she safe?"

"I wouldn't be back if she wasn't," said Uncle Dick with a wide grin. "If you ain't able to talk don't say a word, but I'm dying to know how it all happened."

"You ain't any more curious than I am to know how the hell you got down into that hole. I thought I had gone crazy when I saw you," murmured Peace.

"Take a look at my arm, and I'll give my yarn and then hear yours. The Quail dressed it. Reckon she did all that was necessary."

Uncle Dick drew up a stool and removed the bandage from the upper part of Joe's right arm. There he found a bullet hole through the flesh near the shoulder, but the bone was unharmed.

"Bump on the head hurt worse'n the bullet," informed Peace, as Uncle Dick redressed the hurt. "And I made myself a present of that. Lucky bump at that, too. They was fetching me up the road and it was black as ink. I managed to work my hands free and untie the rope round my feet. I spurred to one side and threw myself from the horse. They fired and, by luck, got me through the arm. I don't remember being hit, for when I struck the ground it nearly knocked my head off. I figured that the horse kept on going, and they thought I was aboard and gave chase. Next thing I knew the Mexican was bending over me and yelling to Big Knife. They fetched me here and the Quail did the rest."

"Boy, I was never so took back in my life as when I heard you yell out and saw them toting you by the shack!" cried Uncle Dick. "I was plumb flabbergasted. Wonder you wasn't hit by some of our lead, seeing how the man leading your nag kept crowding you toward us. How'd you ever fall into their hands?"

"After I came back to the toll-road and found you and your horse gone, I went back and prowled around them trails up there. Must have followed the same one you did, for it led me to the cañon."

"I swung 'way off beyond the cañon, by taking the left-hand trail," broke in Uncle Dick.

"And I followed the other till it started to descend into the cañon. I saw the shack and the gang, so I drew aside from the trail and worked along the top of the eastern wall. About sundown I came to a likely-looking spot and decided I could make it. It was near the mouth of the cañon and too near the guard posted there, but, once it was dark, I decided to chance it.

"Say, the minute I got well under way all hell was let loose. Shooting, bugles playing, Injuns howling and white men cussing. I finished by going down in a rush. I supposed there were soldiers sitting into the game, and my idea was to join them, but the Injun cries bothered me. Then some Injuns nearly rode over me and tried to brain me. I couldn't see anything but I could smell them, and I reckon anything on foot was their meat.

"Next I met up with some loud-swearing white men and danged if one of them didn't sight me by the flare of a gun and take a whack at me. Every one seemed to be against me, so I dug back under the cliff, thinking to make a dash for the shack. The road-agents put up a game fight, every one shooting by guess and the whole bunch milling around. Then come more agents and more Injuns. First thing I knew some of them had passed in between me and the cliff and they was fighting all around me. Now I wanted to side in with the Injuns, but I knew if I offered to help they'd pot me for an agent. No soldiers showed up, yet, every once in a while, I heard that bugle play.

"I couldn't go ahead or sneak back. Then a gun went off over my head and I had a glimpse of a tall cuss with a black mask over his phiz. He cracked me over the head with the barrel of his gun, and then some one pulled me on to a horse, me dreaming what I would do in another minute. The minute up, and they had taken my guns, tied my arms, roped my hoofs under the horse's belly and we was traveling somewhere lickety-cut. I had a notion we was out of the cañon. Reckon my senses didn't all clear up till we got close to the fire, and there was you, standing out in front of that little cabin and working your guns, and the agent that had my horse by the bit was trying to crowd me in to catch all the lead. That's the first clear thought I can remember—they was using me to catch lead. Next I knew my mouth was open and I was calling to you."

"Lordy! Lordy!" gasped Uncle Dick. "And they fetched you through the hind end of the cañon and over one of their back-trails to the pass. Which way did your horse go when you took to the ground?"

"Don't know anything about that—just guesswork. They didn't pick me up or finish me off, so they must have chased the nag. I know we was near the gate."

"The Mexican will know if any horsemen passed through. You yelled something about Keene—for me to look out for him."

The whimsical expression which had accompanied Peace's description of his adventures vanished.

"Keene is one of them," he growled. "And damn his pelt, I'm going to nail him!"

"Was he in the cañon last night? I saw quite a lot of them with their masks off. He wasn't among them, but I didn't get a good look at the ones who went out to relieve the guard."

"I didn't see his face, but I'm sure he was in the cañon last night," said Peace. "There's a tiny shack near the mouth where the guard could take shelter in bad weather. It's on the same side where I came down the cliff. Two or three times I was swept up to it by the fighting. He may have been down there till the fighting began, but when they was riding up the cañon and I was getting my wits back, one of the gang made game of me, saying, 'Dropped in to see that I didn't talk to Miss Mary, eh?' Now, there was only one man who would have said that—Keene."

"He was harking back to your talk to him when you two come near fighting with knives in the next room," murmured Uncle Dick.

"Exactly. And the man who said it was the one next to me on my right, for the cur leading my horse never yipped a word and kept as low over his saddle as a Comanche. The man on my right drew ahead when he struck into the patch of light cast by the fire. He was the chap in the black mask."

Uncle Dick swallowed convulsively and cried:

"I knew you was going to say that! But how about his voice? Didn't you hear him laugh or speak?"

"Bah! No human being was ever cussed with such a voice. A trick of his. You oughter heard him mimic Baptiste to Miss Mary. You'd swear he was the trader himself. Wait till I can get on my feet—maybe to-

morrow—then I'm going to see him and have a little fuss."

"You oughter be all right by day after to-morrow anyway. Reckon I'll do a little looking round myself. I want to pay him for two mule-loads of trade-stuff and then help hang him, if he can't prove he's innocent."

"It won't come to hanging, if I see him," said Peace slowly. "We'll both begin shooting promiscu's-like on sight. How's Miss Mary?"

"All beat out. She'll sleep all day most likely."

"I'm hungry to see her and talk with her."

"To-morrow. Go to sleep. Rest is what you need. The bullet hole won't trouble you much. Now I must talk with the Mexican. We must know whether the agents passed through the gate or turned back!"

"We was aiming for it when I quit the saddle. Maybe they turned back though," mumbled Peace, closing his eyes.

Uncle Dick returned to the eating-room and tapped softly on the girl's door. The Quail appeared, holding a finger to her lips, and Uncle Dick nodded, highly pleased that his charge should sleep. Repairing to the kitchen, he asked the Mexican if any horsemen had passed through the gate during the night, bound south.

The Mexican promptly swore by all the saints that no horsemen had used the gate. The barrier was raised only early in the morning to let the freighters through and to bring Peace inside.

Filling his pipe, Uncle Dick walked to the rear of the cook-house, where Yellow Bear and his men were

separating the trade-goods into two piles, one for themselves and one for Little Raven and his followers. The division was finally completed and Uncle Dick asked the chief to step aside.

"The men we followed rode up the pass toward the gate. The Mexican says they did not pass through the gate," he informed.

"All Mexicans are liars," calmly replied the chief.

"But this man has worked for me for some time and I believe him."

"Cut-Hand and the Arapahoes would have met them if they had turned back."

"I know, yet I think the Mexican spoke the truth. He wouldn't dare lie for the sake of stealing the toll."

"Then their horses have wings like the thunderbirds, and flew over the mountains," sarcastically suggested the chief, tentatively daubing a bit of vermilion paint on his nose and trying to get the effect by looking cross-eyed.

"There are new trails back from the road and high up—trails you would never suspect unless you stumbled upon them. I want you to send your best trackers to look for signs. They either turned back, or else they have a secret trail that leads over the top of the pass without going through my gate."

Yellow Bear promised:

"My men shall go out after they have eaten. If there is any hidden trail they will find it."

Standing with Yellow Bear before the entrance to the station, Uncle Dick received the reports of the Arapaho scouts. Pieced together, their observations con-

vinced him the gang had taken to both sides of the pass high above the toll-road before reaching the gate. Splitting into small parties, some of them had turned back, probably returning to their old haunts on the Purgatory. It was Crooked Arm who scored a coup in the mountaineer's estimation by proudly announcing the discovery of an unsuspected trail leading over the summit and tapping the toll-road on the south slope. By following this, and at the expense of an extra hour of rough riding, one could avoid the toll-gate entirely. This trail, Crooked Arm explained, followed one of the terraces which rose in succession from the road to Raton Peak in the east.

After his interesting information had been absorbed, Crooked Arm proudly added:

"Men riding fast have passed south over that trail since sunrise."

"How many?" snapped Uncle Dick.

Crooked Arm held up both hands with the fingers extended and further explained:

"The way is rough from here to the trail, but the trail itself is good for ponies, narrow but clear. I did not follow it back to where it strikes into the road south of the big gate."

"You keep on and you'll win a whole headful of feathers," complimented Uncle Dick in English. Then in Arapaho: "Crooked Arm has done well. His eyes are like an eagle's. He shall have a new rifle when I go where there is a big trading-store."

Then Yellow Bear spoke up:

"The white men have scattered, half going south,

half going back toward the river. What does my brother ask the Arapahoes to do?"

Uncle Dick was in a quandary. His resentment against the gang had accumulated slowly. At first it was caused by his natural prejudice against a lawless element, based on the law of self-preservation or the primitive fear that he, personally, might be one of its victims. With the advent of the girl into his life, however, this general bias had evolved into a violent hostility, and, whereas formerly he would have been willing for the authorities to eliminate the nuisance, he now deemed it his duty as an individual to harry the gang and lay the leader by the heels.

"Those who have gone south have probably separated. Some have gone to Cimarron, some to Las Vegas, others to the Valley of the Taos, perhaps to Santa Fé or into Mexico. They're either gone for good or will be back, but those who have returned to the Purgatory will keep together. I think we shall travel back to the river."

"My warriors will ride after we have eaten again," said Yellow Bear with a side glance at the cook-house.

Uncle Dick was on the point of ordering that a second meal be served the Indians at once, although the first had barely been bolted, when the arrival of the north-bound stage demanded his attention. Several passengers hurried to the eating-room, eager to partake of the excellent fare after rather trying experiences with the average station food.

Halting the driver, Uncle Dick inquired:

"See any agents on your way up the pass?"

The driver shifted his cud of tobacco and admiringly asked:

"How'd ye happen to guess it? I was goin' to tell after I'd et."

"Then you did see some?"

"I wa'n't bothered any, or ye'd heard me bleatin' the minute I hit the top of the pass, but if I didn't see that damn' Chuckle-Luck peeking at me from the bush, I never hope to hold ribbons over a overland coach outfit again."

"And he didn't try to hold you up?"

"No, sirree! I was watchin' the road ahead as I struck the slope. Somethin' moved in the undergrowth. The grade was steep an' I knew I couldn't make a bolt. I yapped for the passengers to have their stuff ready. The mules have been held up so many times that they got ready to stop. But nothin' happened. I slowed down an' looked into the bush an' got a glimpse of Chuckle's face. He wasn't wearin' a mask but seemed to be hidin'. Well, says I, I give ye yer chance. If ye're too damn' proud to hold me up ye can go to hell. An' I passes on an' leaves him."

"Thanks. Better go eat. Injun friends have sort of reduced my supplies and the passengers are getting ahead of you."

The driver bolted for the eating-room but paused to shoot back over his shoulders:

"I was forgettin' to say that I seen a friend of yours."

"So?"

"Young Sam Keene, what was hangin' round here

for a few days. He was trying' to whip his hoss into a gallop, the damn' tenderfoot, and the poor animal was streaked with lather as if he'd been goin' it hellity-brindle for a week of Sundays."

Uncle Dick thanked him with a nod and commenced tugging at his iron-gray locks. The stage-driver's gossip upset his plans. The real game was to be found south of the pass. He entered the station and went into Joe Peace's room. There he found Joe awake and disposing of an ample lunch which had been brought in by the Quail.

"The squaw says Miss Mary is sleeping like a top. I was powerful glad to hear it," greeted Peace.

Uncle Dick agreed that this was good news and said:

"A while ago I was saying to you that I reckoned the gang had gone south and that I intended to follow them. Since then, Yellow Bear's bucks have learned that the gang split, part going south and part returning toward the Purgatory. I shifted my bets and decided to track 'em north again. Now comes the north-bound coach and the driver swears he saw Chuckle-Luck hiding in the woods beside the road, and that he met Sam Keene riding hard toward the south. So I've come back to my first plan. I ride south."

"They'll scatter. You'll have a hard time finding them, even one at a time."

"That's what I'd opine if they had all gone south, but, with half returning to the Purgatory, it can't be the other half is disbanding. It's dad-burned mystifying. So long as they trifled with the coaches, I left

it for the government to give 'em their medicine, but when they troubled my girl they challenged me to fight. I'm peaceful as hell, but after you slap my face about so much I'll show grit."

"I'll go with you," promptly declared Peace. "But how do you know those going north aren't planning to disband?"

"It ain't the country to scatter in. Injuns everywhere. Only white men are in the forts, the folks that agents will steer clear of. In the south they can drift into Mexico or to Californy."

He might have added, if he had felt at liberty to disclose what he believed to be the girl's personal affairs, that he suspected the north-bound party to be in search of the place where the girl had picked up the nuggets. This theory, while forcing itself upon him, did not afford any explanation for Chuckle-Luck's riding south.

"Making for Santa Fé," remarked Peace.

"They'll rest up somewhere on the way. At least Keene must stop and get a fresh mount—probably at Whoa-Haw, this side of Cimarron."

"We'll go where they can be found the thickest," muttered Peace.

Uncle Dick hesitated; then asked:

"You still opine Keene is the leader of the gang?"

"He must be if he is a member of the gang. The rest are common riffraff ruffians."

Uncle Dick agreed to this, saying:

"From what I see of 'em—and I had a pretty good chance to size most of 'em up—there wasn't any man of big caliber except their boss. Chuckle-Luck is a

rattling good hold-up man; he knows the work part of it, but he ain't got brains enough to keep the bunch together and under his thumb. But he's good as far as he goes. I'll give him credit for that. He worked hard and cleaned up fine, when operating alone."

"I ain't interested in Chuckle-Luck. When I meet him I'll shoot him, but Keene's the man I'm after, damn his hide! Had the gall to try to make up to Miss Mary. I'll get him if I have to follow him to Mexico City."

"You hadn't ought to travel before day after to-morrow," mused Uncle Dick. "See here. S'pose I start at once, while the trail is fresh, and just dog 'em along. If you're able, day after to-morrow, you can come after me. My first stop will be at Whoa-Haw. If I pick up any news there and have to move on before you come, I'll leave word for you at Old Tommy's bar in the Happy Fortune. But I'm free to say I'd feel safer for the girl if you was to stick along here and keep guard."

'I'll stay here two days, if I don't feel fit to pull out before," said Peace. "No rules against my talking to Miss Mary?"

"Rules are all off. She's got back her senses."

"Holy Pike's Peak! You don't mean it!" cried Peace, his face lighting up and losing its worn and haggard look. "She remembers everything, then?"

"Everything. When the gang stole her and took her down the pass in the coach, you'd expect she would 'a' gone crazy entirely. Maybe she was scared 'most to death. But when they pulled her out, all of them wear-

ing masks, she got the jolt the army surgeon said she might get some time. Started her brain to circulating something handsome-like."

"But tell me all about it. She was their prisoner. She's met Keene up here. She must know if he's the gang's leader. Lord! Why don't you talk?"

"Softly. Her name is Isobel Deland. When you talk with her don't speak of her past life unless she begins it. There's some mighty sore and disagreeable spots in it. Let her take the lead. As to knowing anything about the gang, she was kept hived up in that shack. She didn't see the leader except when he was masked. The cuss seems to have a knack of being with the gang and then disappearing."

"I'll be very careful. My, but it's good to know she's got her senses back! I'll 'fess up, Uncle Dick, that young woman knocked me all in a heap. But before she could remember, it was like sprucing up to a child."

"Go slow," warned Uncle Dick. "Don't bother her with any foolishness. Time enough for that after she gets used to having her brains back in working order. I sha'n't see you again, as I start right away. Don't get too rash and try to follow me before you're fit."

Returning to the cook-house, he found Yellow Bear waiting to be fed, and informed him:

"My medicine tells me I must ride south instead of north. I don't know how long I shall be gone. While I am away I want my Arapaho brothers to stay here and watch over the medicine-woman. They shall be well paid."

"There is no pay between friends," said Yellow Bear. "No harm shall come to the medicine-woman."

"She was stolen from me once," reminded Uncle Dick.

"She shall not be stolen again."

"I go to find the leader of the men we fought in the cañon."

"Cut-Hand's medicine is very strong. He will count a coup."

The mountaineer overhauled his weapons and ordered a boy to bring a fresh horse from the corral. While waiting for his mount, he was joined by the Quail, who pronounced the magic word:

"Preety."

"Awake, eh?" cried Uncle Dick.

Without a word the Quail turned and shuffled back into the station. Uncle Dick followed her and she opened the door to the girl's room.

Miss Isobel was seated at the open window, a blanket wrapped about her. She stretched out a hand in welcome and motioned him to be seated beside her. He anxiously inquired:

"How's your head now, Miss Isobel?"

"I'm all right. The Quail has tried to tell me about Mr. Peace. How badly is he hurt?"

"One arm mussed up a trifle. Didn't touch the bone. He'll be on his feet in a day or so. Funny thing, but he's been worrying about you."

She colored warmly and evaded.

"And Mr. Keene? He could make me laugh even when I was so worried. He made the Quail angry

one day because he talked just like her. It wasn't nice and I told him so, but it was funny."

"Natural-born mimic," muttered Uncle Dick. "Used to take off a half-breed trader, Baptiste, I'm told."

"You say he isn't here?"

"I haven't but I will. Hasn't been round since you——"

"Were stolen," she completed as he halted in confusion. "Don't be afraid of my nerves. They jangled and hurt only when I couldn't remember things. That was because I was afraid of myself, not of anything else."

"Well, Keene has gone. He's gone for good, I'm sure. When I come back I may know more about him. Until we do know more about him, however, it's best not to think of him too much," Uncle Dick warned, feeling very awkward at the task.

"Very little seems to be known about any one out in this country," she soberly remarked. "Even I came here without any memory or history. I was interested in him the same as I was in Mr. Peace, because the Quail said he went out to help find me."

"So he did. So he did," confusedly mumbled Uncle Dick. "He's a curious cuss, begging your pardon."

"He seemed to be several kinds of men in one man," she murmured. Then with a little laugh, "And I couldn't quite tell which was the real man. Sometimes he seemed downright simple. Then again——"

"Then he seemed to be mighty cute and wise," finished Uncle Dick. "You've hit him off to a T. When he acted simple he wasn't showing his true self,

I'll bet a jug. He was a stranger to me till I met him at Muddy Crick. May be a saint or devil, for all I know, but I can count on the fingers of my crippled hand all the saints I ever met out here. The little girl I called Mary June heads the list."

"You'll turn my head again so I won't remember anything," she rallied. Then thoughtfully, "But he seemed nice."

Uncle Dick coughed apologetically and warned:

"Never take a stranger on trust out here on Raton Range, Miss Isobel. Treat 'em civil but learn something about their folks and their business before banking too heavy on 'em."

"You took me on trust without knowing anything beyond the fact that I was brought here by two outlaws. You took me on trust after learning my uncle was one of that terrible band."

"I wasn't speaking of children. Joe Peace 'lows he'll be afoot in a day or so and sort of hankers to talk with you. I've told him to follow your lead. You don't have to talk about anything you don't want to."

"I hope he will be able to be about!" she softly cried. "As to talk, there's nothing to tell, except about my uncle. I—I think I won't tell that just yet. Maybe he'll be able to be about to-morrow."

"I'll bet a jug on it! Now, little girl, I'm going to be away for a few days."

"Oh, that's bad news!"

"While I'm gone, a parcel of Arapahoes, the Quail's people, will stick to these diggings. Ugly-looking critters, some of 'em. Given to painting them-

selves up some promiscu's, but they're friends of mine. If you step outdoors and see a Injun peeking at you from behind a rock or bush, be glad he's there, for he'll be keeping a friendly eye on you."

"I'm sorry you must go. I won't be afraid of the Arapahoes. I'm only afraid of some white men."

"That will be done away with in time," Uncle Dick quietly assured her.

The boy brought the horse to the door. Uncle Dick bade the girl good-by, summoned the Mexican and gave him instructions as to feeding the Indians.

"Whisky they have must, they say," said the Mexican, his English fluent but, as usual, reversed.

"If you give 'em any, I'll scalp you. Not a drop."

With this final warning Uncle Dick mounted and rode up the pass.

At the crest of the ridge he halted to gaze at a snow-covered range more than two hundred miles away. Viewed through the marvelous atmosphere, it appeared to be within reach of an afternoon's stroll. Nearer loomed Fisher's Peak, named after one of General Kearny's artillery officers and reminiscent of the Mexican War. Behind him, in the little depression, was his toll-gate and station and Isobel Deland.

"If she don't up and get married I'll adopt her as my daughter," he declared. "If she marries a good chap I'll adopt both of 'em."

And, perhaps for the first time, he rode down toward the southland with his thoughts on a woman, rather than on the enduring monuments of ancient days.

Soon after the discovery of gold in Colorado, some of the plains tribes, notably the Kiowas, had engaged in the lucrative practise of running off immigrants' cattle. When a train was too strong to be attacked, a midnight dash, with the bucks dragging buffalo robes over the ground, was sufficient to stampede any stock not securely corraled. The Kiowas usually did this at a small stream down the trail where the trains were accustomed to camp. "Whoa-Haw" was a word added to the Kiowa vocabulary at this time because of its frequent usage by the bull-whackers in controlling their cattle. When Old Tommy, a withered wisp of anatomy, came from nowhere and opened a general store and saloon at this camping site, it became known as Whoa-Haw. Besides the store and saloon, under one roof, there were five or six small shacks.

Whoa-Haw's only excuse for existing was the thirst of passing freighters and the occasional call for provisions by prospectors. Cimarron was the nearest settled community, and Whoa-Haw's population was largely transient. It resulted that each man observed his own laws. A superficial inquiry was made into violent deaths, but this form was observed more to satisfy the curiosity of Old Tommy and his assistants than to preserve any record of a homicide. Feuds having their inception up or down the trail, or back in the mountains, were terminated at Whoa-Haw with knife or bullet, and the survivor's story was usually accepted—especially if he displayed a disposition to corroborate his testimony with a gun.

Bandits of the trail never hesitated to stop here for

fresh mounts, a feed, or a jug of whisky. Old Tommy often announced that a road-agent's money was not only good over his counter and bar, but that if he depended for a living on the gold of honest men he couldn't make enough to keep a rat from starving. While this was an exaggeration, it served to show that Old Tommy possessed no narrow prejudice against gentlemen of the road. The latter appreciated this attitude and often varied the monotony of bush life and hold-ups with a carouse at the Happy Fortune Bar.

Uncle Dick, after pausing to sprinkle dust over his person and to rub grime over his face, hitched his horse under the store-shed and, with his saddle on his shoulder, stumbled through the darkness toward the saloon. Outside, he halted and surveyed the interior. A dozen men were grouped along the front of the bar, while one man seemed to have the end to himself.

The bar was made of slabs, with a front of bullet-proof logs, and stood very high. Old Tommy had left his store—connected with the saloon by a door—in charge of his assistants and was now helping his bartender serve drinks. Inside the bar was a low platform which enabled Old Tommy and his men to stand high enough to maneuver the liquor and glasses across the rough boards.

The bartender was a squat, stocky individual with a round head and no neck. Old Tommy resembled a vicious monkey. Their elevated position brought them above the heads of their patrons. To accommodate the travel-worn and intoxicated, there was a continuous bench, or settle, made fast to the wall and extending

across the two ends and one side, cut only by the entrance from outdoors. Along this were stretched several men who had succumbed to weariness or drink. Prospectors with dust-filled beards and bags of specimens were there. Others of nondescript occupations were sleeping in grotesque postures. As Uncle Dick gazed, one man rolled to the floor, crawled to his knees and rested his head and chest against the settle and continued his slumbers without awakening.

Observing that the section of the settle next to the door leading into the store was vacant and afforded a general view of the long low room, Uncle Dick drew back from the window and made his entrance. Those at the front of the bar barely noticed him. Old Tommy and Shorty, as the bartender was called, appraised him with swift keen glances. The man at the end of the bar stared at him closely till he saw him drop wearily on the settle and arrange the saddle for a pillow. Curling up his legs so that the top of one dusty boot was within reach of the fingers of his right hand, Uncle Dick drew his hat low over his forehead and scanned the scene while pretending to sleep.

With the exception of a drunken freighter, the company was strange to him—rough backwash from the hills and the New Mexico mines. He estimated that two-thirds of those present were lawless in thought and action, and that the remaining third was very careless. More than one avaricious glance was cast at him and the other sleepers, but Old Tommy's rule was well understood—no robbery of the person could be perpetrated on the premises.

"What happens outside ain't none of my business," he often declared. "But to take it from 'em in here is cuttin' into my trade. You've got the whole of New Mexico an' Colorado to do 'em in, an' if that ain't enough jography for ye, I reckon ye ain't up to yer job. Hands off in the Happy Fortune."

Old Tommy, though apparently a shriveled-up shell of a man, mummified except for his bright little eyes, possessed the courage and venom of a rattlesnake, and behind a brace of long-barreled revolvers he was a formidable opponent. The bartender was scarcely human, apart from the phenomenon of speech, but he was devoted to his employer and dispassionately obeyed orders, even to cutting throats. He also possessed a cunning knack of hurling large knives the length of the room and nailing his target nine times out of ten. There had been occasions when, from his elevated position at the bar, he had completely routed desperadoes intent on wrecking the place, by the terrible expedient of throwing his knives into the throng, sowing death or fearful wounds with each cast. It was very seldom that a stranger could find any disorder at the Happy Fortune Bar.

And yet, although knowing Old Tommy's characteristic insistence upon ruling his own roost, the mountaineer soon discovered that the proprietor could be obsequious. This trait of deportment was now noticeable in his bearing toward the lone man at the end of the bar. The man's ragged apparel and general disheveled appearance would not prepare one to expect him to be the recipient of any courtesy from the pro-

prietor, and yet Old Tommy neglected spendthrift customers to wait upon him. Had his appearance been more prosperous, Uncle Dick would have classed him as a professional gambler. This because of his round, steadily staring light eyes and the unusual pallor of his thin face.

" 'Nother of yer partic'lar, Mr. Free," urged Old Tommy ingratiatingly, shoving forward the bottle.

Without removing his gaze from the entrance to the store, the man spilled a few drops of the strong liquor in the glass and liberally diluted it with water, using his left hand.

Uncle Dick murmured the name to himself reminiscently; then he remembered. Jack Free, a very bad man, a killer by instinct. He had run a bloody course in Santa Fé until public opinion, backed by a posse, had ousted him. He had created his reputation of being a killer after Uncle Dick retired to the top of the pass. The mountaineer knew of him only through hearing the freighters and traders discuss him at the station.

"He's watching me," decided Uncle Dick. "Suspects every newcomer and ain't sized me up yet. Looking for a man to tote a bullet to him every time the door opens. Don't dare let himself go and get foolish with the drink."

Free continued his study of the mountaineer simply because he was the last man to have entered the saloon from outside. Now, a man wearing a long Mexican blanket and high-peaked, broad-brimmed hat walked unsteadily into the saloon from the store. The im-

placable gaze of the killer caught the man at the entrance and followed him to the middle of the bar, waited while one shaky hand fumbled at a glass, then dropped him and wandered back to Uncle Dick. Now, however, the gaze was less insistent.

A little diversion was afforded when a hill-man slid from the settle and, with a miracle of balancing, managed to keep his drunken feet while he picked up a bag of specimens. Lifting the bag to his shoulder, he made for the bar with wide, rangy steps. Another drink was his objective, although from his gait it was obvious he had had too much already. He fell rather than walked the last five feet, and only saved himself from measuring his length by catching the edge of the high bar. The momentum of his approach spun him sidewise and sent him reeling against Free. With a catlike hiss, Free made a lightning movement that hurled the awkward one aside and, before the man fell to the floor, Free had him covered with a gun.

The tableau in which the killer was bending forward, his nervous finger on the trigger, the miner on the floor gaping stupidly at the rough ceiling, his bag of specimens scattered in all directions, lasted for several moments while the spectators waited for Free to shoot. Then, with a legerdemain that was startling, the desperado's gun vanished from view and he resumed his former attitude without speaking a word.

Old Tommy, relieved that an indoor tragedy had been averted, advanced the bottle and humbly invited:

"Have jest 'nother tech of that trouble on me, Mr. Free."

Free waved the invitation aside and glared around the room, his round eyes as opaque and expressionless as two marbles. Those who were initiated into the external signs of Free's working up of a homicidal rage became absorbed in their liquor, fearing to catch his eye and attract his attention. Those nearest the exits surreptitiously estimated the time it would take to plunge from range of his deadly guns. Even Old Tommy shivered, for he had read the signs before. Free was approaching the point when only bloodshed would satisfy him. Shorty, searching for an excuse to get hold of one of his favorite knives, began carving a roast of meat, his round head occasionally turning in Free's direction, as if revolving in a ball-and-socket joint. He carved very thin slices very slowly so as to make his pretense last.

Gradually even those not knowing the killer's ways felt that a storm was brewing. There seemed to be a sinister quality in the atmosphere which hinted at spilled blood. More than one envied the miner, who was now snoring loudly, lying flat on his back where he had been hurled. None dared brave the tempest by attempting to withdraw.

There was nothing psychologically subtle in the cause for Free's rage. He wanted to drink but, although confronted with an inexhaustible supply, he dared not imbibe. His tattered dress and uncouth appearance bespoke a long journey through lonesome places, and he had hailed the Happy Fortune as an oasis.

Then instinct had insisted that he keep sober,

though every nerve urged him to get drunk. It was true he could shoot unerringly when half drunk, or as long as he could see, but the Santa Fé experience, repeated on a minor scale at Las Vegas, had warned him that his drunken, indiscriminate killings were becoming taboo, that he must practise more economy in victims. It was this suspicion of himself, animal-like in that it did not rise above instinct and was but vaguely understood even by the killer himself, that was feeding the fires of his sullen rage.

From beneath his hat-brim the mountaineer watched him and interpreted the deadly menace in the round eyes. The street door opened and a newcomer instantly attracted the killer's attention. Uncle Dick, simulating sleep, heard the door open and close, but dared not move his head. He kept his eyes on Free and was surprised to see the malignant eyes lose some of their venom. Free appeared to be almost pleased to behold the newcomer. Old Tommy's warped face wore a smile of greeting as the stranger advanced down the bar. Shorty gave him a glance; then revolved his head toward Free and laid aside his knife. By some telepathy the drinkers understood the climax had been postponed and all relaxed.

As the stranger crossed Uncle Dick's line of vision he appeared much like any wayfarer. He was travel-stained and wore a dark scarf round his neck, which, with the slouched hat pulled low over his eyes, blocked even a view of his profile. Without any hesitation he made for the end of the bar and halted at the corner, his back to Uncle Dick. Instead of resenting this

intrusion, which cramped him for room should he fancy to indulge in gun-play, Free moved toward the wall a step, filled two glasses and eagerly drained his own.

"Feels safe to guzzle it down now," inwardly commented Uncle Dick.

Voices were loudly raised at the bar. Those near Free and the stranger unostentatiously moved away a few spaces, leaving the two quite alone. Free's lips curled slightly in welcome and he nodded as the other made some remark from the corner of his mouth. For several minutes the two talked with fluttering lips. Free motioned for the bottle and refilled the glasses.

Then Uncle Dick noticed something which was lost on the other patrons. Before setting down his glass, Free sent one stabbing glance around the room. Then he placed the glass on the bar, as if impelled by something the stranger had said. The latter pushed the bottle back, after examining it briefly, and motioned for another. As Old Tommy hastened to serve him, the man said something, and the proprietor's wrinkled visage grew blank and then showed reluctance. Although he could see only the man's back, Uncle Dick knew he was urging something on Old Tommy. The other was holding back. Then Free, without looking at him, said something, and the withered countenance hardened, the deep-set little bird's eyes glittered, and he dropped his head in assent.

"I'd like to know what that tall galoot whispered to him," mused Uncle Dick. "Something's going to be pulled off here that the crowd ain't expecting."

Old Tommy now left the pair alone, but in passing Shorty he murmured something that may have been connected with the bartender's abrupt cessation from wiping glasses. Picking up a heavy knife, he began slowly carving the meat, although one would have said the supply already exceeded the demand. The two at the end of the bar drank from the new bottle, and again Free sent his catlike gaze sweeping the room.

"Damn it! What's up?" Uncle Dick murmured. "Something is going to happen." Free's eyes dropped back on the empty glass, and in that moment Uncle Dick's fingers were advanced till they rested on top of his boot-leg.

The killer toyed with his glass as if weighing some problem. His companion stared straight ahead at the wall behind the bar. After a bit of this indifference, the stranger walked to the window behind his companion and stood with his back to the room, looking out into the night.

As if reaching an important decision, Free gave a jerk of his shoulders and moved from the bar, his gaze fixed on the miner snoring in the middle of the floor. The drinkers followed him with furtive glances, all their former apprehensions returning. As Free shifted his dull eyes and stared toward the bar, every head went right-about, and all became voluble over trivial things.

Again Free studied the sleeping miner, pausing to turn over some of the specimens with the toe of his rough boot, all the time swinging his head slowly from side to side as if guarding against interference, but never once, Uncle Dick noticed, did he seem to be con-

cerned at what might happen behind him. The stranger, however, remained at the window,—an excellent mirror for one wishing to keep tabs on the scene,—his thumbs in his belt.

Puzzled and wondering why the killer made no overt move, Uncle Dick watched through half-closed lids. Free continued staring at the specimens and at the sleeping man, stepping slowly away from him until he was well down the line. As the men at the bar felt his presence behind them, their bodies registered the effect with little convulsive movements. In the wooden face of Shorty, now carving more briskly as if his task were nearly done, there was no revelation of the impending dénouement.

Free's right hand now twitched slightly. He was standing in the middle of the room, opposite the store entrance, his profile to Uncle Dick. The mountaineer's fingers curved round the butt of the revolver in the top of his boot. Without any preliminary move to betray his purpose, Free spun about on his heel, his revolver appearing as if by magic and spitting a shot, just as Uncle Dick jerked the saddle in front of him.

The killer's bullet thudded into the saddle, and at the same moment the gun leaping from Uncle Dick's boot fired once. Free dropped his weapon and straightened his full height, as if striving to stand on tiptoe, then crashed to the floor, face down.

A dead silence greeted this miracle of Jack Free's death. Then the man at the window shouted:

"Shoot him! He's one of Gentleman Ralph's gang!"

Shorty's thick arm went back, holding the heavy

knife by the tip, and then fell to his side as a bullet from one of the drinkers' guns smacked into his low forehead. The man at the window yelled something inarticulate and, crouching low, threw up his gun. Uncle Dick fired, smashed the window behind him and felt a second bullet strike the saddle. By this time the men at the bar had dragged forth their weapons and were turning on Uncle Dick. Before a shot could be fired, some one, an excellent marksman, extinguished the two smoky lamps with as many shots.

As Uncle Dick darted through the store entrance, still clinging to his saddle, he was followed by a string of bullets. Two men sprang forward to stop his flight, but the sight of his gun caused them to duck for cover. He shot out the lamps in the store as a mob of shouting men poured through from the saloon, but as there was now no light, the mountaineer, as he glided through the door into the night, heard the sound of heavy bodies violently colliding.

Running to the shed back of the store, he found his horse and hurriedly threw on the saddle. He could hear some one at the other end of the shed similarly engaged, but the darkness made any observations impossible. Groans and cries still sounded in the Happy Fortune, but, as Uncle Dick tightened the last strap, he suddenly discovered he could make out surrounding objects. As he was wondering at this phenomenon, the horseman up the line tore by him, his horse kicking and plunging as the strange rosy glow began to spread across the night. The rider, cursing and spurring his beast, took time to lean from his saddle and fire point-

blank at the mountaineer. Only the gyrations of the assassin's frantic mount caused the bullet to go wild.

With a yell of rage at the murderous attempt on his life, Uncle Dick drew his gun and began firing, as the horseman turned the corner of the shed. Then mounting, he gave chase, firing rapidly.

He could not see his man and rode by the sound of the clicking hoofs. After several bullets had swished close to his head, he dismounted. He suddenly realized that he furnished an excellent target as he stood between the fugitive and the light behind him. A glance over his shoulder and the light was explained.

The windows of the Happy Fortune saloon glowed red, and smoke curled from the eaves. Smoke was also creeping along the roof of the store. Some one had attempted to relight a lamp and had set fire to some of the spilled liquor, and Old Tommy was about to lose his tinder-like set of buildings.

Pausing only to reload his guns, Uncle Dick climbed back into the saddle and spurred south.

"I'll get him if I have to tag him to hell and gone," he furiously vowed. Then regretfully: "But Joe won't get any word from me at the Happy Fortune Bar. Maybe the ruins will be word enough."

A flash in the darkness ahead, and he ceased his meditations. On they rode, firing at the sound of each other's horse. Behind them Old Tommy's buildings burst forth into a beautiful crimson flower blooming high against the heavens. Uncle Dick reined in and listened. The click-clack of the fugitive's animal no longer guided him.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE PATH OF TRAGEDY

IT WAS midday when Uncle Dick rode into Cimarron City, hungry and disgusted. Stubbornness had held him to the trail; for reason told him his chances of running into any of the outlaws were very slim. Jack Free's new friend at the Whoa-Haw saloon must have been a member of the gang, else there was no reason for the killer's attack on a man who was a stranger to him. No, there was no question but that one of the outlaws had incited the attempt at murder, and this because the gang had decided it was time the mountaineer was removed. This being the case, the man escaping south down the trail would not fail to warn his companions.

He wondered if he would not have had better luck had he followed out his first plan and journeyed back to the Purgatory. Only the stage-driver's insistence that he had seen Chuckle-Luck and Keene on the south side of the slope had influenced Uncle Dick to seek the leader of the band on this side of the pass. The man in the Happy Fortune Bar who had induced Free to attempt murder, was similar in appearance to any one of a thousand border rovers. Inasmuch as Free had never been known to engage in any lawlessness,

outside of his mania for killing, Uncle Dick had not suspected the desperado's friend to be a member of the band of road-agents.

The pursuit from the burning buildings, however, and the repeated shots from the darkness ahead, connected with a reviving memory of the characters who had patronized the station eating-room, was convincing him he had been exchanging lead with Chuckle-Luck. The smoking lamps, his own cramped position on the settle and the man's trick of concealing his features with scarf and hat, had made any identification very dubious. If the man were Chuckle-Luck, the mountaineer believed he had been off his trail for twenty-four hours.

He had had various opportunities for making inquiries along the trail and, curiously enough, while obtaining no news which would indicate that Chuckle-Luck was ahead, he did gather from one detailed description that Sam Keene was riding hard for Cimarron City. This bit of information was given him by Pecos Frank, an extra driver who was taking Turkey Bill's coach through. From the driver's laconic remarks, Uncle Dick concluded Turkey Bill was incapacitated by drink. As a news item, this was surprising and afforded matter for deep cogitation for those who were acquainted with Bill's immunity in the matter of drink.

"Anyway, he wa'n't on hand. They sent me out," concluded Pecos Frank.

The driver then spoke of a galloping horseman, and his description, given by one trained in observation, satisfied Uncle Dick that Keene was at Cimarron or pushing farther south.

With his thoughts still on Keene, the mountaineer hitched his horse outside the long, low eating-house and entered. He was weary from his strenuous experiences and threw himself heavily down upon the first vacant seat. A grunt of surprise across the board caused him to glance up, and he found himself gazing into Baptiste's little eyes.

"Strayed off your reservation?" growled Uncle Dick in no good humor for meeting the breed.

"I'm here, Mr. Wooton, on business," sullenly informed Baptiste.

"I pity the poor devil on the other side of the bargain," jeered Uncle Dick.

Baptiste scowled; then, simulated indifference to the slur and calmly continued:

"There's a reward for dead outlaws. I'm going to collect on the one buried at Muddy Creek."

"That's the business you referred to?"

"That's the business, and I'll trade a good profit. The expenses won't be much."

"You take it off both the dead and the living," softly remarked Uncle Dick.

"The Overland Company is glad to pay the reward."

"So you've toted the stiff way down here, I reckon."

"I have not." Baptiste smiled knowingly. "I understand you don't like me, Mr. Wooton, but you ain't the kind to spoil any man's honest business deals."

He paused, as if inclined to say more but not quite satisfied as to whether it would be safe.

"I ain't out to spike any man's game that ain't crooked," gruffly assured Uncle Dick.

"I knew it," murmured Baptiste. "Well, there's been so much robbing up the trail that I think the Overland Company will be willing to raise their price. I want to sell on a high market."

"Of all the dad-burned, cold-blooded—— Huh! I s'pose you can't help it. It's in your natur' and just has to crop out. How long you been here negotiating your sweet-smelling trade proposition?"

"I just come in ahead of you," sullenly replied the trader.

"Seems to be a lot of folks on the street. Yet they're mighty quiet and sober, for Cimarron. Didn't know but what you would *sabe* the reason."

"I noticed the people. I didn't ask no questions."

A man at the next table, who had overheard the question, turned to Uncle Dick and loudly informed:

"Good time for a crowd to be out. Good reason for 'em to be thoughtful, although a few drinks wouldn't be out of order. There's some grim business ahead for this town."

"I see," said Uncle Dick. "As to which?"

"As to two of Gentleman Ralph's gang what's in limbo here. Going to hang 'em at sunset."

On hearing this piece of information Baptiste dropped his knife on his plate with a clatter. Uncle Dick bent his gaze on his informant for a moment, then asked:

"Do you happen to know if one of the cusses is Chuckle-Luck?"

The citizen shook his head and returned to bolting his food, evidently anxious to get through the meal and

mingle with the crowd outside, so as to miss none of the sport. To make himself perfectly plain he volunteered:

"Neither ain't."

"More's the pity," sighed Uncle Dick. Then maliciously to the breed trader, "Too bad you can't sell them for the reward."

"Mr. Wooton, I don't like the way you speak," protested Baptiste. "I'm a honest trader. Money is offered by the Overland people for a certain article. I can supply it. Only now I'm worried that this killing two of them here in one day will put the price down."

A new thought popped into Uncle Dick's head and he demanded:

"How can you claim all the reward? Doesn't Sam Keene come in for half of it?"

"Mr. Wooton, that man isn't any good. Besides, when I bought his trade whisky I bought his good-will. That includes any claim he may have had on the certain goods I've spoke to you about."

"Don't doubt it. That's a sensible business view of it," gently agreed the mountaineer. "I just happened to mention it, as I knew Keene was down here. Didn't know but what you two come together to divvy on the reward."

Baptiste slumped back and glared wildly at Uncle Dick.

"Keene down here? Ain't you joking, Mr. Wooton?"

"Maybe I'm mistook, but he was ahead of me on the trail and heading fast this way. Don't reckon he'd pass

without stopping. Perhaps he heard two of the gang was rounded up and decided his business took him farther south."

Baptiste's dark face lighted up and he whispered:

"Mr. Wooton, I reckon you and me think the same thoughts at times."

"The hell we do!" growled Uncle Dick.

Baptiste decided he had satisfied his appetite, and rose and departed before Uncle Dick could offer to go along with him. In fact, there was an abruptness in his leave-taking that strongly suggested a desire to be alone. Uncle Dick and the man at the next table rose together, and the stranger said:

"I'm Sim Hopkins, in trade at Las Vegas. I come up here with a bunch of our boys and we was invited to stay over and see that the two chaps at the jail ain't run off by any of their friends. Cimarron's all right, I tell folks, but when you want things done, or don't want certain things done, they just have to draw on old Las Vegas. We're always glad to 'commodate."

"I'm Dick Wooton. Toll-gate up on Raton."

"Lord love a duck! Reckon my freight has paid you enough toll for us to be acquainted. Powerful glad to see you, Mr. Wooton."

"Uncle Dick is my handle to honest folks," corrected the mountaineer. "Such critters as that half-breed, Baptiste, I let mister me. Keeps 'em at a distance."

"Uncle Dick it is then, with all my heart. Shall we walk up toward the jail and see how things is going?"

This was agreeable to Wooton, and the two set forth and quickly observed that more men had entered

the town while they were at the table. Some of these newcomers kept apart in little groups. All looked to be desperate fellows. One could not judge by appearances, however, as the most lawless-appearing band proved to be deputy sheriffs from Las Vegas, present to prevent Gentleman Ralph from making a rescue.

Hopkins knew these men and introduced Uncle Dick, who was cordially greeted, there being none of the Las Vegas people who did not know him by reputation. One of them, a young man with long corn-colored hair, told the mountaineer:

"No doubt but what Cimarron needs our help. There's some of Ralph's men passing by us most of the time. But he's got a big gang and lots of his men are new to us. Come here from Californy and never used Las Vegas as a stamping-ground, so we can't tag them. We're hoping they'll give themselves away by trying to rush the jail."

"Who's the two you snagged?" asked Uncle Dick.

"Uncle Dick, that's s'posed to be a secret till we're ready to swing 'em," interrupted Hopkins.

"Oh, I didn't go for to be forward. Good idee to keep it dark. Keeps the gang guessing. S'pose you've got a clear case against 'em?"

"Tolerable," said the young deputy. "One's caught with some marked coins on him. The company shipped a small box of double eagles. Caught the sucker the first thing. T'other chap was chinning with him mighty confidential and tried to make a break when the Cimarron sheriff come up. Best to be on the safe side and hang both of 'em."

"I reckon," agreed Uncle Dick. "When in doubt as to the cusses, let 'em stretch a rope. If you make a mistake you can repent at leisure."

They had now approached within two hundred feet of the squat, solid structure which served as a jail, and the deputy halted them, saying:

"Sorry, but we mustn't go any nearer. If you wasn't friends of mine you'd 'a' been turned back at the corner where my mates are."

"Not taking any chances on the wrong crowd getting close," observed Hopkins.

"Oh, the boys know you two is all right. You're with me," was the naive response. "But the idee is to leave the street clear and free in front of the jail. Then, if a bunch goes to ker-whooping up here, we know they're part of the gang and every one shoots to please hisself."

Uncle Dick touched the deputy's arm and nodded toward a desperate-looking character who wore his hair, mustache and two revolvers very long. This individual was several paces ahead of them and lounging beside a packing-box. The deputy grinned and explained:

"Las Vegas sheriff—our boss. The agents would suspect some trap if no one wa'n't on deck. The sheriff seems to be the only man ready for gun-play, but let something bust loose and there'll be twenty men and forty guns backing him up."

"I can see them looking out the window," said Hopkins, jerking his head toward the jail. "One dodged back. Now t'other one does. But Turkey Bill was always slow on his feet."

"Turkey Bill! Hell's hinges!" exclaimed Uncle Dick. "Mean to tell me that non-fighting critter is mixed up in this deal?"

The deputy looked his confusion and mumbled:

"I didn't mean to let on. Kinder slipped out, but so long as the jailer let them get to the winder, reckon I ain't give away much. Might as well finish. Turkey had his jeans filled with them marked gold-pieces. The trick was expected to cost the company a round sum, but damn' if they don't bag two men and get most of the coin back!"

"But that Turkey Bill never had guts enough to fight a rabbit!" expostulated Uncle Dick.

"But he had head enough to tip off the gang when a extry fat box was going through. That's proved and clinched fast enough. He had a woman down to Las Vegas and got to spending lots of his off time down there. We folks began to notice—Hopkins here was one of the first—that she was being provided for right lib'ral. Turkey 'lowed he was lucky at gambling. We let it go at that, but the marked coins give him away. No matter how cute they be, they're sure goners once they have anything to do with a petticoat."

"The marked coins was a cute trick. Seems expensive, but it ain't so much so as being robbed two or three times a week," observed Hopkins. "New slant for the company to take."

"Yes, siree! We folks down here sorter feel the company's set a new man after the gang."

"Who's t'other chap? One that ducked back from the winder?" asked Uncle Dick.

"We're still holding out fifty per cent. of their names," reminded Hopkins with a grin.

The deputy colored at having his slip recalled. Uncle Dick apologized profusely, declaring:

"Honest to Hen, Hopkins, I plumb forgot! Once I got the name of one, I grew as keen as a woman to know the rest. I won't breathe a word about what I already know."

"That's all right," Hopkins heartily assured him. "Makes me feel cheap not to tell everything, but our sheriff wanted it played this way. Come back to the bar and punish some strong water. Too many horses kicking up dust, for a man afoot."

"Dust always poisoned me," admitted Uncle Dick.

Their escort regretted that his official duties precluded his accompanying them, and they left him at the corner with his mates. As they entered the bar, Uncle Dick rubbed his eyes and stared eagerly at the back of a man about to take a drink. This man carried one arm in a sling. Uncle Dick stepped to one side in a sly reconnaissance. Hopkins, thinking his new friend was about to meet an enemy, loosened his gun and stood ready to see fair play. To his astonishment Uncle Dick gave a whoop, clapped the man on the shoulder, seized his left hand and shook it warmly.

"Cussed if it ain't Joe Peace!" snorted Hopkins, joining in the hand-shaking. "What's wrong with your gun-hand, Joe?"

"Hurt it," evaded Joe.

"How's things up the pass, Joe?" anxiously asked Uncle Dick.

"Fine. The young lady is in high spirits. Only waiting for you to come back to be perfectly happy."

"I didn't know——" began Hopkins, then coughed.

"My adopted daughter," snapped Uncle Dick.

"That's what I didn't know," softly explained Hopkins.

Peace laughed; then grew sober and asked:

"I've just come in. What's all the men mean? Haven't seen a man drunk, yet every one seems to be on the street."

"Got two road-agents waiting to be strung up," informed Hopkins.

"Hell's hinges! You don't tell me! Why, that gang will be whittled to pieces if it keeps on losing them two at a lick. Who are they?"

"They're keeping the names under their hats, Joe. Wouldn't even tell me, Hopkins wouldn't," broke in Uncle Dick as the Las Vegas man began to show confusion.

"Probably a fool arrangement, but there's so many yarns about Gentleman Ralph being in town and ready to steal his men away that we promised each other to keep shet till it's time to noose them. We reckon the gang has scattered and that they don't know who's missing for sure. Howsomever, it'll soon be known to everybody."

"If they're agents, that's all that counts," grimly declared Peace. "They'll hang as dead by one name as by another."

"Still, we're only picking round the edges so long as their boss goes free," Hopkins gloomily remarked.

"We've got men scattered all over the place ready to pick up any suspicious-looking stranger. That's the hell of not having a description of him!"

"His men must know him. They've probably told," said Peace, turning back to the bar, measuring out a drink and passing the bottle.

"If any of them talked, we don't know it," growled Hopkins, filling his glass. "One of our prisoners is hopeless. Can't get a word out of him. T'other one will blab, I reckon, but he ain't done so yet. Well, let's ease that drink home with a companion."

Hopkins' round was disposed of and Uncle Dick insisted that the circle be completed, but the drinking, neither among the three friends nor in the other groups, was marked with the usual jollity. A low buzz of suppressed excitement pervaded the room. Each time a man, or a party of men, entered, every head was turned to make an appraisal. Suspense, attending the firm belief that Gentleman Ralph would audaciously attempt some trick, was in the air. As the three were finishing Uncle Dick's round, the young deputy sheriff bustled in, his heavy holsters flapping against his legs. Uncle Dick ordered a drink for him.

"Just relieved from duty," he announced.

Uncle Dick made him and Peace known to each other and the latter asked:

"Taking turns standing guard?"

"No. That is—well, it ain't necessary. Jail's so strong."

"Peace is a friend of mine and Uncle Dick's. He's all right," said Hopkins.

"Oh, I know that. But so many strangers round." He turned and darted a swift glance behind him; then invited the three to advance their heads and whispered:

"We've decided that the only way to get the gang to show itself is to draw off all the guards but the sheriff. He's still lying low behind the packing-boxes above the corner. We begin to feel it's about time the cusses tried to rush the place."

"Played it off like you all were tired of sticking round when nothing was happening, without having a chance to get anything to eat or drink," said Hopkins.

"You *sabe* top-high," affirmed the deputy, winking slyly and slapping a coin on the bar.

"No more for me," protested Uncle Dick. "Could climb the steepest side of Pike's Peak without any spurs on, right now."

Hopkins and Peace also pleaded previous indulgence and left the deputy to drink alone while they returned to the street. There they found the same ominous quiet, the same little groups, mostly mounted, and the same air of general expectation that they might soon witness a reckless climax. Peace turned toward the jail, expecting his friends to fall in beside him.

Hopkins demurred, saying: "The less of us there is round the jail the better the chance for the trap to work."

"Reckon I won't go up again, Joe. I'm keeping an eye out for another chap," added Uncle Dick.

Peace, who was undecided whether to satisfy his curiosity alone, or to remain with his friends, gazed at Uncle Dick inquiringly.

"I'm meaning Sam Keene," whispered Uncle Dick.

"Is he here?" gritted Peace, his left hand dropping to his belt.

"He was headed for here. Now, Joe, don't go off half cocked. With one arm out of commission it won't do."

"I can shoot with my left," quietly replied Peace.

"Well, right here is as good a place to lay for him as anywhere," urged Uncle Dick.

"Maybe, but I'm thinking I'll walk a bit. I shan't go near the jail but I want to squint at some of those men on horseback. I'll be back soon."

Uncle Dick, when alone with Hopkins, explained:

"There was a feller up at the station who's acted powerful queer. I reckon he's a real bad one. Joe didn't cotton to him. Looking for him now."

"When they meet I hope Joe sees him first," said Hopkins.

The double line entering and leaving the saloon worked the two into the horse-path, and now those in front of them hurriedly pressed back, as, with a jangling of spurs, a squad of men in the uniform of the United States Cavalry swept up. The mob cheered and Uncle Dick and Hopkins were jammed tight in the mass of humanity. As the riders drew abreast, Uncle Dick, his arms pinioned to his side by the crush, gasped inarticulately and then began yelling something at the top of his voice.

Hopkins supposed he was cheering the troopers and felt his own enthusiasm kindling to the point where he must give it vent, and he lustily joined in the

outcry. With a desperate effort Uncle Dick finally freed one arm and hooked it about Hopkins' head and drew him down till he could bawl in his ear:

"Help me get out of here! Gorramighty! The man leading the soldiers is Chuckle-Luck, Gentleman Ralph's right-hand man! They ain't real soldiers! They're riding to clean out the jail!"

With a frantic bleat Hopkins hunched his broad shoulders, twisted, squirmed his way to the door of the saloon and grabbed the complacent deputy sheriff by the collar and began dragging him through the crowd, shouting, meanwhile:

"Dirty work! Get your men to the jail! Them soldiers are road-agents! Chuckle-Luck is leading them!"

By degrees this astounding intelligence was spread through the immediate neighborhood. At first men scoffed or became stupid through amazement, and valuable time was lost. Finally, however, a nucleus of belief was created.

A dozen irate men in a solid body, with Uncle Dick, Hopkins and the deputy in the lead, managed to get into the road, where their united voices scattered the news rapidly. As they ran toward the jail, others fell in behind them with guns drawn. Those who did not understand the situation believed mob rule was to anticipate the advertised hanging and zealously took their places in the procession.

A few men loitered some two hundred feet from the jail. These fell back as the cavalcade swept toward them. Rumblings of anger greeted the advent of the

troops, the citizens fearing they were to be cheated of the double hanging. The Las Vegas sheriff behind his packing-box spat in disgust and laid his revolvers on the box, believing the military arm of the law was to usurp the prerogatives of the civil.

The mounted squad drew abreast of the Las Vegas officer, and the leader suddenly leaned from his saddle and fired, dropping the sheriff across the box with a bullet through his bronzed neck. Then, with the road clear, the horsemen raced furiously up to the jail, where two men were pressing against the grated window.

Turkey Bill shouted in joyous relief as he recognized Chuckle-Luck. The second man ducked back, but not before Uncle Dick, now turning the corner, recognized Sam Keene.

To the astonishment of all, for even Uncle Dick and his followers had looked for nothing like what ensued, the mounted men, as one, threw up their carbines and, in racing by the window of the jail, fired through it. Then, with spurs driven home and firing a scattering volley to intimidate the citizens, they raced away, striking north toward the trail.

Cimarron City remained stunned. Uncle Dick set a good example by emptying his guns after the bobbing figures, but even he reacted mechanically, his border sense telling him simply that bullets called for bullets.

The gathering crowd alternated between staring stupidly at the jail and after the receding cloud of dust. Those nearest the packing-box dumbly watched

Hopkins and the young deputy lift the Las Vegas sheriff's long flowing mustaches from the pool of blood, while they ascertained that the bullet had barely missed the jugular vein.

"What's up?" cried a familiar voice, and Uncle Dick wheeled to behold Peace, bareheaded and wild of mien, a revolver gripped in his left hand.

"They was wearing soldiers' uniforms," mumbled Uncle Dick. "Pretty nifty bunch!"

"But what does it mean?" demanded Peace. "The Army can't take prisoners from the civil authorities like this."

"The Army ain't. Make-believe soldiers done it. Chuckle-Luck headed 'em," wearily explained Uncle Dick.

Peace began to call for a posse. Hopkins turned the wounded sheriff over to the care of his deputies and informed Uncle Dick:

"They say that sometimes them cusses rig out as Mexicans, sometimes as herders. Reg'lar play-actors. But if Chuckle-Luck was leading them, where was Gentleman Ralph?"

"In the jail!" snorted Uncle Dick. "Mighty smart idee of your friends to set a trap for 'em to walk into."

Before Hopkins could digest this irony, two men came from the rear of the jail, running a zigzag course, leaping and bounding from side to side as if to dodge a volley, their faces revealing rage and fright. These were the jailer and his assistant. Both carried guns in their hands, and their wild gesticulations caused the crowd to break and duck for cover. Hopkins seized

one and Uncle Dick the other and reduced them to a semblance of calmness.

Joe Peace's call for a posse was rapidly thinning out the crowd. Every man who had, or who could borrow, a horse was participating in the chase. Uncle Dick had no faith in the ability of the hastily organized posse to overhaul the outlaws, and he proposed to take his time in returning north. He remained with the jailer and his assistant for the present, staring at the grated window. Hopkins had surrendered to the enthusiasm of action and, on a white mule, was bringing up the tail of the long-drawn-out pursuit.

"S'pose we must go in and clean up," sighed the jailer. "Damn' shame, too! Turkey Bill was just at the p'int where he was willing to tell all he knew 'bout the gang. Then he seen the soldiers coming and shut up like a clam. If I'd had a minute more I'd had some secret information that would 'a' raised Ned with the whole gang. T'other cuss wouldn't say nothing."

"Reckon the gang knew Bill would tattle," remarked Uncle Dick. "I was close by when they shut the mouth of one of their men who was about to blab."

"Think of 'em wearin' cavalry uniforms!" gasped the assistant. "Must 'a' got 'em from deserters."

"The clothes was new, I noticed. Quartermaster at Fort Lyon was robbed of some uniforms two months ago. No one dreamed it was the work of agents. We reckoned some trader got 'em to trade with the Injuns."

"Well, they looked like real soldiers to me," re-

gretted the jailer. "When I see them coming I was all fussed up. I knew the boys had come in to have a good time and I hated to see Uncle Sam spile the party. Believing they was soldiers, me 'n' my assistant went back to the kitchen, when, jumping Jerusalem! thought the top of the jail was blowed plumb off! Ran into the strong room, and one look was enough for me. Both gents on the floor covered with blood! Even then we couldn't git the truth through our heads."

"Mr. Wooton, are the robbers dead?" asked Baptiste, who had approached unobserved.

"Somewhat," replied Uncle Dick, eying the trader malevolently.

"To think of their shooting Turkey Bill! He always seemed a nice feller," said the breed.

"Sp'iled a very pretty hanging," grunted the jailer. "When the crowd gits back they'll be techy in the temper and string up the first suspect they come across, 'specially any of Bill's friends."

"That dog never had no friends," warmly protested Baptiste. "I'm glad Bill is wiped out, if he was a outlaw. Of course a hanging would 'a' been better. Mr. Wooton knows how I feel against outlaws. I've got one buried up on Muddy Creek. Who's the other feller?"

"Maybe you can tell us," said Uncle Dick. "S'pose we all go and have a look."

"I don't care enough to do that," demurred the trader. "A man killed in a fight is one thing to look at, and a man killed by a crowd is another."

"Still, I reckon you'd better look the stranger over

for the sake of the record," gravely insisted the sheriff, sensing Wooton's antipathy to the breed and gravely motioning for Baptiste to precede him.

Baptiste did not relish the experience but, with a shrug of his shoulders, made the best of it and walked to the rear of the jail. The back door was open, testimony of the jailer's haste in quitting the building. The door to the strong room was also ajar. The jailer threw this back and pushed the breed over the threshold, saying:

"Look them over. Know the other feller?"

With a yell Baptiste crowded back and choked:

"Only one in there!"

Throwing him aside, Uncle Dick stepped into the room. Turkey Bill lay on the floor, shot to pieces, but Sam Keene was gone.

"By Hen! A dead man gets away!" faintly exclaimed Uncle Dick.

"But he couldn't! Dead men don't walk!" feebly argued the jailer.

"He was layin' face down on the floor," vacantly remarked the assistant.

Pulling himself together, Uncle Dick cast a glance about and snapped:

"He wasn't dead. Perhaps he wasn't wounded. See if there's any blood trail."

A casual examination of the back room was enough to prove that no such signs had been left by Keene in his flight. The mountaineer sharply continued:

"He's downright smart. He saw his men coming. He'd probably got word to them to do it and rub Bill

out. Then he dropped and played 'possum while Bill was killed. He reckoned on getting away in the confusion, even if he had to wait till his body was fetched outdoors. Oh, he's a game and a very wise cuss! You two come in and, thinking both was dead, didn't bother to fasten no doors when you quit. Every one was busy shooting and chasing after the outlaws. All he had to do was to sneak away."

"My best gun's gone, belt and all!" wailed the jailer, pointing to an empty nail in the back room.

"Gorramighty! My hat an' rifle!" babbled the assistant. "Let's rustle out an' pick him up."

Uncle Dick smiled sourly.

"Save your wind," he advised. "A man smart enough to play this trick ain't traveling afoot."

"But who is he? I never heard of Sam Keene," fumed the jailer.

"No one else did till he tacked the name on to himself. You had Gentleman Ralph himself in your clutches and he's vamoosed. He had it rigged for his men to ride up and give him a chance to escape."

The jailer was speechless. The four walked through the back door and round to the front of the building. The street was practically deserted. It was Baptiste who broke the silence by shrilly exclaiming:

"Mr. Wooton, some one's taken my pony! He was hitched down there when I hurried up here to talk with you."

With a cry of rage Baptiste ran from them.

"That's how your prisoner rode away," gritted Uncle Dick.

"I never liked that half-breed. If a hoss must be took, I'm glad it's his," declared the jailer.

"Baptiste will make good hanging material before we're through with him," grimly prophesied Uncle Dick. "If he ain't a go-between for the gang, you can string me up."

With that he narrated some of his experiences at Muddy Creek when he had first met Sam Keene.

"At that time," he concluded, "I don't think the breed knew Keene to be the leader. Perhaps he didn't even suspect he was connected with the gang. Or again, he may have believed him to be one of the gang's lookouts, posted at the crick to pick up information and keep an eye on Mr. Baptiste. Well, I reckon I'll be plugging back to the Pass, now that all the agents seem to be going that way."

Arriving at the station, Uncle Dick was met by the Mexican who looked after the gate. The man was inarticulate for a minute because of the great news he had to impart. Uncle Dick leaped from his horse and shook the fellow violently; then released him, warning:

"Now, speak!"

"Road-agents—four!" choked the Mexican. "Come the woman to take!"

"What?" roared Uncle Dick. "Them hounds back here again? They got Miss Isobel—and you're alive to tell it?"

"The woman gone was when come the road-agents," yelped the frightened Mexican.

"Steady, you mistake of natur'!" gritted Uncle

Dick. "Where did she go? Who did she go with? Get that upside down English of yours to working."

With much pantomime embellishing his reversed English, the Mexican finally managed to explain how Miss Isobel had gone riding with the Quail; how, shortly thereafter, the Arapahoes, including even the always-hungry Big Knife, had deserted the station in a body, with no word of explanation; how the south-bound stage had pulled in and reported a band of Kiowas lurking near the mouth of the pass; and how white men, superbly mounted, had come like a whirl-wind and held up the station, almost before the stage had passed up the grade.

"Which way did Miss Isobel and the Quail ride?" asked Uncle Dick.

The Mexican pointed down the north slope. The mountaineer groaned as he believed he had solved the mystery. The girl had gone riding to forget she was lonesome. The Quail had dutifully followed, after telling her people to come after her if she and the girl did not return promptly. Satanta, still smarting over Wooton's discovery of his conference with some of the northern chiefs, had brought his band to the mouth of the pass and had stolen the girl.

That her disappearance was not due to the outlaws, was evidenced by their bold visit to the station after the girl had gone away. That the bandits had spied on the station to the extent of outwitting the sharp eyes of the Arapahoes, and had known the master and Joe Peace were absent, was also obvious.

"All comes of leaving Injuns on guard when

there's a chance for them to stuff their hides with white men's grub," he groaned. "Well, there's a chance that Yellow Bear may overtake the kidnapers, but, in the fight that's sure to follow, only the good Lord knows what'll happen to her."

He hurried into the station and hastily looked over the premises. His room had been ransacked. A small hair-covered trunk was upturned on the floor and a small stock of gold was missing.

"Pocketed the gold through habit," he mused, studying the disorder. "But they didn't come just for that. They was after the girl, to make her tell where she found the nuggets."

He next visited the girl's room. It had not held the outlaws' attention, once they learned she was gone. The general appearance of tidiness was not disturbed. He was turning to go, when his gaze caught a new decoration on the little rustic shelf by the door. It was picture-writing drawn on a piece of paper with the end of a charred stick. It was characteristically Indian in execution, and he knew the Quail must have been the artist. He took it down and examined it carefully.

His fear gave way to thanksgiving as he readily interpreted it to read:

The Medicine-Woman—as indicated by the wavy, mystic lines above her head—and the Quail—shown by the smaller figure below—had taken horses and gone to Arapaho teepees. The many hoof-marks meant the two were accompanied by Yellow Bear and his men. The crudely drawn quadruped on the teepee signified a bear, or Yellow Bear's camp. To make doubly sure he should understand, she had added the symbolic circle around the teepee, to be interpreted as a cloud, or "Blue Cloud People"—Arapahoes. What was more, the camp lay beyond the trading-store of Baptiste on Muddy Creek, as shown by the shack with its chimney. The figure of a man wearing a hat—a white man with a cross displayed at his side, together with the symbol for the Cheyennes—indicated one of both white and Cheyenne blood.

"But why the devil didn't Miss Isobel leave me a note if she knew where she was going? She didn't know. She thought she was going for a ride. Yet the Quail knew and had time to make this picter-writing. Something happened to make the Quail feel afraid to stay here, even with her people on guard. Injun-like, she said nothing to the girl, but made this writing and asked the girl to go riding, tipped off Yellow Bear to follow them and then bolted. Now what could have scared her into doing that?"

He called the Mexican and cross-examined him as to the behavior of the Arapahoes. They had had no liquor, the Mexican vowed. They had kept scouts out on both sides of the road. After the two women had ridden down the road, they had quietly mounted

their ponies and followed, without a word of explanation.

Greatly relieved but none the less puzzled, Uncle Dick entered the cook-house and hurriedly ate a hearty meal. He felt but little concern for the girl's safety, now that he believed Yellow Bear and his braves were guarding her. Satanta and his Kiowas would hardly dare attempt stealing her unless they could do so stealthily.

The precipitate flight of the Arapahoes proved that the Quail and her people feared something and were not to be taken by surprise. Perhaps they had learned of the road-agents' plans to raid the station, and did not care to give battle while cooped up in the pass. How they could have gained this information was another problem.

Finishing his meal, Uncle Dick wrote a message and left it with the Mexican to give to Joe Peace, should the latter show up. Then, procuring a fresh horse from the corral, he started on the trail of the Arapahoes.

CHAPTER IX

THE MEDICINE OF THE ARAPAHOES

IF ANY of the road-agent band lurked in the by-trails up the slopes, they gave no hostile sign as Uncle Dick rode down the pass. He had seen nothing of the Cimarron posse nor of Joe Peace and deduced that the pursuit of the bogus soldiers had not struck into the south slope of the pass, but had led to one side into the hills. This would account for the fact that at least twelve of the highwaymen had not participated in the station-house raid, but the knowledge satisfied him none.

Four men had dared to come after the girl in broad daylight. This fact mocked his vigilance and proved that the outlaws kept close tabs on his coming and going. Another example of the band's excellent system of espionage was demonstrated by its quick knowledge of Turkey Bill's and Keene's predicament. Their ability to learn Turkey Bill's inclination to betray gang secrets and their prompt brutality in closing his lips was proof positive that spies were scattered all along the old trail.

The written message from Gentleman Ralph directing him to put the girl on One-Eyed Cassidy's coach at first bothered Uncle Dick's direct process of thinking.

If Keene were Gentleman Ralph, how could he have been at the station quarreling with Joe Peace and at the same time be down the south slope holding up Cassidy and making him his messenger? He now realized, however, that it was unnecessary for the leader to deliver the message in person to the stage-driver. Any one of his men could have assumed the rôle.

What remained entirely inexplicable, however, was the memory of the two masked horsemen exchanging shots in the toll-road, while the mountaineer looked on from the Devil's Elbow. The scene at the Happy Fortune saloon also recurred to bother him. The stranger, Chuckle-Luck, had induced Jack Free to commit murder. Shorty, the grotesque bartender, had been incited by the same agency to throw his deadly knife at the toll-gate keeper. Chuckle-Luck must have seen him before he entered and recognized him.

That was not very puzzling, but what friendly hand had shot out the lights and stopped Shorty's knife? An explanation might be found in the theory that a patron had sought to open an avenue of escape from flying bullets and had had no thought of benefiting the mountaineer. Yet this line of reasoning did not satisfy Uncle Dick. A steady hand and a cool brain had been behind the three shots.

Wearying of the riddle, Uncle Dick dismissed it and pressed on to Muddy Creek. He purposed calling there before proceeding to the Arapaho camp. The latter was located, according to the picture-writing, in about the same spot where Satanta had received certain chiefs at night.

It was nearing sunset when Wooton came to the cottonwoods behind Baptiste's store. Dismounting, he warily approached the creek. There was no sign of life about the store. Keene's empty shack across the stream stood with door half open and the rag of a blanket still hanging across the window. Convinced that the breed had not yet returned, the mountaineer led his horse through the timber and turned him loose to graze. Next he hurried down-stream to the grave of Deland, Miss Isobel's uncle. The grave had not been disturbed and Uncle Dick smiled grimly as he recalled Baptiste's gruesome assertion that he would exhume the body and collect the reward.

"He wouldn't dare uncover it for fifty thousand dollars," he mused. "That is, not unless Gentleman Ralph gave the order."

Splashing across the stream, he entered Keene's shack. The place had been stripped. As Uncle Dick gazed about the bare walls and shelves, he wondered where the stock of liquor had been kept. Not on the floor, improvised from packing-box material, for there were no telltale circles to indicate where jugs or kegs had stood. And again, the floor was of flimsy construction, the weight of the trade goods having come on the stout shelves.

More from curiosity than because it had to do with his errand, Uncle Dick examined the floor. Beside the stone fireplace he found a trap-door and, throwing it back, saw that it opened into a small cellar or pit. Tearing a splinter from a box-cover, he lighted it and dropped below. A crude flooring of saplings marked

where the trade liquor had been stored. The light from his torch revealed nothing but this and the earthen walls of the pit.

He was about to quit the hole when instinct impelled him to throw the saplings aside. At first, only the damp soil rewarded his efforts, but as he persevered and cleaned them away to the wall, he came to a box-cover. Removing this, he looked into a box sunk in the dirt. Removing a section of buffalo-hide, he found several interesting exhibits. One was the uniform of a United States cavalryman. Another was the coarse homespun clothing of an immigrant. In a third package was the gaudy apparel of a Mexican dandy.

"Miss Isobel 'lowed he seemed to be quite a few men all chucked into one," he mused. "Reckon this explains how he used to do it."

Replacing the hide, the cover and the saplings, he crawled up through the opening. His horse whinnied outside. Peeping from the window, he saw his animal was facing the cottonwoods, his ears pricked forward.

Slipping from the shack, he crossed the stream and seated himself before Baptiste's door, his rifle across his knees. He remained thus for several minutes, when a slight noise at the end of the store and on his right caused him to shift the position of his rifle to cover that point of approach. In a moment Baptiste's dark face peered around the corner.

"You, is it?" called out Uncle Dick.

"Mr. Wooton, you didn't ought to scare honest folks like that," complained the breed as he advanced.

"My horse oughter told you I was here."

"It told me some one was here but you were out of sight. I didn't know——"

He stopped and glanced at the mountaineer's wet boots and then looked across to the shack.

"Uh-huh," affirmatively grunted Uncle Dick in response to the silent query. "Went across to make sure no one could pot me while I waited for you to show up. Shack is cleaned out, I see."

"I took the liquor. You took the trade goods," reminded Baptiste thoughtfully. "I think I shall tear it down. It makes too good a cover for any one wanting to hide up and shoot me."

"Noticed you hadn't dug up your dead robber yet." Baptiste frowned.

"Killing that fellow at Cimarron, Mr. Wooton, seems to have took the edge off the market," he sorrowfully confessed. Then hopefully: "But the price will go up again after a few more coaches has been robbed."

"That's the talk. Never lose heart," encouraged Uncle Dick. "You went with the posse?"

"I chased after it after I'd bought me a horse, but couldn't get in sight of it. That feller taking my horse made my trip pretty expensive. I kept going on and entered the pass, thinking the chase must 'a' gone that way. But when I reached your station a Mexican man said no horsemen had gone through, that you'd been there and gone. So I reckon you're the one who has the news."

"Ain't seen hide nor hair of 'em. Chase must 'a' led off to one side. Never entered the pass at all."

"I see," murmured the breed, his eyes questioning. "Then what are you doing down here?"

"I'm reckoning there's a secret path that they use when they don't fancy to pay toll or be seen. Thought I'd come down this way and look about."

"I do hope they'll be driven out the country, Mr. Wooton. The way they act is just spoiling my trade. I've been looking for Satanta and some of his Kiowas to come in and trade, but so much riding and shooting scares them. Ain't traded a single robe in weeks. If things would quiet down, a man might make a living."

"Too bad. I'm mighty sorry for you, Baptiste," consoled Uncle Dick. "But you'd better look out, or old Satanta will be raising your hair."

"My Injun blood is medicine against that," said Baptiste with a shrug of his shoulders. "But I'm forgetting myself, Mr. Wooton. We don't have to stick out here. How would a little drink strike you?"

"It would be comforting," acknowledged Uncle Dick, rising.

The breed reached to the top of the door and removed the end of a rawhide thong which was noosed round a nail and then led through a hole to the interior of the store.

"Never noticed that contraption before," remarked Uncle Dick as Baptiste proceeded to unlock the door.

"A little trap of mine to stop folks trying to rob the store while I'm gone," chuckled the breed.

As he threw the door back, the mountaineer jumped aside, for the muzzle of a musket, mounted on forked saplings, gaped ominously over the threshold.

"It can't do no harm now," asserted Baptiste, picking up the gun and coiling the rawhide. "It's filled with slugs. Any one opening the door while the line is fast to the nail will git a bellyful. One night when I come back from a trip I found a Cheyenne in the doorway. I'm half Cheyenne but I didn't care to make any presents to his folks, so I buried him down the creek."

"You've got a fine start toward a personal graveyard," said the mountaineer.

"I was very sorry, but folks didn't ought to go nosing round," sighed the breed as he hunted out a jug and a glass, reserving a dipper for himself.

Uncle Dick waited until his host had drunk heavily; then tasted the liquor, found it fair and swallowed it. The breed rubbed his stomach appreciatively. The drink seemed to brighten him amazingly and he insisted that Uncle Dick remain all night.

"That's neighborly of you," said Uncle Dick, "but I don't know as I can. I ought to be getting back to the station. No knowing how many that Mexican has let go through scot-free. He'll never collect from his own tribe if he's on the gate alone. Besides him there's only the cook and a couple of boys."

"And the Quail," supplemented Baptiste.

"Of course, the Quail," said Uncle Dick, wondering just how much Baptiste had learned while at the station.

"Anyway, you'll eat with me?"

"We can't drink all the time," was the acceptance.

"Now that is fine, Mr. Wooton. Maybe you'll change your mind and stay the night. I know you ain't liked me very much, but if you get better ac-

quainted you'll find me a man of my word. I'll be rustling some grub while you see to your horse. You'd better picket him up the creek where the feed's better."

Uncle Dick secured his horse and rode up-stream, but instead of grazing improving, it grew worse.

"Now why did that lummox tell me the grass was better up here," he exclaimed wrathfully as he surveyed the stony ground. "Injuns could never start on the war-path if the grass never got thicker'n higher'n this.

"Hello! Jumping Christmas!"

The ejaculation was wrung from him as he happened to glance down the creek and, at some distance, behold a tall pillar of smoke piling into the heavens.

With an oath he jerked his horse about, pulled his gun and rode at a gallop along the creek. Sweeping around the store, he came upon Baptiste busily feeding a bon-fire.

"Kick it to pieces! Hump yourself!" he yelled, discharging a bullet between the trader's feet and causing him to jump wildly.

"Why, Mr. Wooton——"

The gun banged again and Uncle Dick roared:

"Kick that fire to pieces. Quick!"

The second shot had grazed the breed's leg and he worked frenziedly in tearing the mess apart.

"Now, what did you mean by that partic'lar trick?" fiercely demanded Uncle Dick, his revolver still leveled at the perspiring and thoroughly frightened trader.

"Why, Mr. Wooton! I was just burning up waste stuff, same's I always do when the store gets

cluttered," wailed Baptiste. "I had it piled up before I went to Cimarron. I remembered about it when supper was cooking, so I touched it off."

Uncle Dick spurred his horse through the smoldering debris and, whirling about grimly, inquired:

"Piled up green grass, eh? You black-hearted liar! Always a man of your word, eh? Dad-rot you, I ought to rub you out just for luck! Who was you signaling to?"

"But I wa'n't signaling to no one," groaned Baptiste.

He presented a curious spectacle, his limbs twisting and writhing, but his features remaining unmoved.

"Why, Mr. Wooton, just look round you. See them! One, two, three burned spots where I've burned rubbish. I always do it."

"Not signaling? And yet there's green grass in that litter. Why did you pile on green grass if not to make a signal? Why did you send me up to that stone-heap if it wasn't to give you a chance to light this mess?"

"You don't understand me, Mr. Wooton," sighed Baptiste. "You see something bad when everything is all right. In dragging the stuff together some grass got mixed in. It always does. As for the feeding-grounds, you didn't go far enough. Just a few rods beyond that bare spot and the grass is good."

"I reckon you're lying to me," was the stern rejoinder. "And I won't eat any of your grub. If that smoke brings any one on my trail, my first job will be to hunt you down and riddle your miserable carcass."

With this warning Uncle Dick dismounted and procured his rifle from beside the door, climbed into the saddle and rode through the creek, his head half turned all the time that he might keep an eye on the trader. Baptiste stood by the ruins of the fire, staring after his late guest but making no offensive move.

"Damn' snake! He'd pot me if he had a chance and had the nerve to try it," growled the mountaineer as his horse dipped into a hollow and out of sight of the store.

The more his thoughts dwelt on the smoke the more he was convinced that it had been made as a signal. Whether he had interrupted it in time, or whether it had conveyed its full message, he had no way of knowing. If one column served the purpose, the message had certainly been delivered, for the towering shaft must have been discernible for many miles.

Life on the plains had early taught Uncle Dick never to leave a menace dogging his tracks. If the smoke had been a signal, then it must have been made to call some one to the vicinity of the store, where Baptiste would be ready to point out the victim's trail. Uncle Dick reined in and pondered the situation carefully. He must sleep outdoors. So long as he must camp, he felt it would be wise to do so at once and spend a little time in examining his back-trail.

Finding a snug spot among the rocks, heavily carpeted with dry moss, he picketed his horse and spread a blanket. Taking food from a saddle-bag, he ate; then lighted his pipe and smoked until the near-by boulders were blurred from view by the night.

Taking his rifle, he traveled in a half-circle until he was back at the creek at a point considerably above the store. He did not cross the stream but worked down until he stood behind Keene's shack. There was a light shining from the store, but, although he waited for a shape to show at the window, he could discern no signs of the trader. Stealing to the front of the shack, he found the door as he had left it, partly open, and, trusting to the darkness to conceal his movements, he glided inside.

Taking a position by the window where the fragment of a blanket still half masked the opening, he patiently waited. Some thirty minutes passed before he was rewarded; then a shrill birdlike call up the creek brought him to attention. He looked for Baptiste to appear in his doorway, but nothing moved within the store. The call was answered. From a difference in timbre Uncle Dick knew it was not a repetition.

Soon he heard the sound of voices up the creek. He started and thrilled with joy and softly thrust the muzzle of his rifle through the window as he caught the high-pitched, wailing intonation of Gentleman Ralph. It was impossible to make out any object along the creek, but when the newcomers should pass within the light shining from the store window he would have something to say.

Now the low voice of the trader was to be distinguished. The tone was very humble and smacking of a hidden fear.

"But damn you!" whined Gentleman Ralph. "Why didn't you do for him instead of calling me here?"

"Oh, sir, I didn't reckon on troubling you," meekly protested the trader. "I was reckoning on your sending one of the boys. I didn't know what to do. He was going to eat with me and perhaps stay all night, but I wasn't sure he'd stay and he was suspicious of every move I made.

"Why, sir, if just by chance my hand dropped toward my belt he'd drop a hand on a gun. And when we come to drink he waited for me to drink, just like he was afraid I'd put poison in his liquor. I didn't want to make any mistake, on account of you and the boys, let alone not wanting to lose my life. If I'd known for sure he'd stay all night I wouldn't 'a' sent up the smoke but just waited till he slept. That would 'a' been easy."

"It usually is when a man's asleep," answered Gentleman Ralph. "You idiot, you let him clear out after he'd said he was suspicious about the smoke?"

"He did carry on about it but I don't think he really believed it meant anything. If he'd been sure I reckon I'd be dead by this time."

"You've played right into his hands," shrilly fumed the bandit-leader.

"But what was I to do?" groaned Baptiste. "How was I to know he'd act so about the smoke? I showed him the burnt spots where I've made signals to you before. I think now he's quite satisfied I was burning up odds and ends."

"You bungled it, damn you!" raged the high-pitched voice. "You knew what I wanted. I've told you enough times since he was here last. You had no

business to send up that smoke when you had him all to yourself. Now that I'm here, how am I to pick up his trail and do work you're paid for doing?"

"He crossed the creek and rode toward the Purgatory. He can be rounded up by some of the boys first thing in the morning easy," eagerly propitiated Baptiste.

"I'm here alone. The men are in hiding. I was the only one to come and you've called me here on a fool's errand and, what's worse, have probably put the old fool on his guard against another trick I have under way and must go through with. You ought to lose both ears."

There was a terrible menace in the sing-song voice, as if some implacable machine were speaking. The breed began to betray a hideous fear, and, although his figure was not to be made out, Uncle Dick could picture the terror in Baptiste's soul as he fell to vowing his loyalty, to recounting past coups for the good of the outlaw gang.

"Shut up!" whimpered Gentleman Ralph. "You've been well paid for all you've done. You never took any chances. You got your money easy. The only time you could have done a real service was a few hours ago, and you bungled your chance. I won't have such men serving me."

"Listen," begged the breed. "I'll take up his trail in the morning. I'll ride till I find him. When I see him, I'll wave my hand and ride right up to him and—and I'll do for him in his tracks. I swear I will!"

The two were now standing at the end of the store

near the door. Did they pass the door and into the light of the window, Uncle Dick would be in position to collect the reward offered for Gentleman Ralph. As it was, he could vaguely make out their shapes, but he could not tell which was which.

The breed resumed pleading:

"If I don't get him to-morrow you can have my head. Come in and have a drink."

"I think I'll give you this one chance. But no more bungling. If you don't get him and he don't get you, keep right on going. Don't come back!"

"Yes, sir! And I'll be sure to fix the old hound," cried the breed ferociously. "And what about a drink?"

"Not in there," was the whining refusal. "You can bring it out here."

"Yes, sir. In just a second!" cried the breed approaching and fumbling at the door.

Uncle Dick dropped to one knee and sighted at the figure remaining at the end of the store. He would fire when the door opened for Baptiste to enter and the light poured out.

Then the terrible thing happened. As the door swung inward there came a loud explosion and something belched flame and smoke across the threshold. Dazed for a moment, Uncle Dick forgot to shoot. He was recalled to his senses by an ear-splitting scream from the bandit-leader. Then the pitiless words:

"You damn' traitor! Take that!"

There followed the *bang-bang* of a heavy revolver.

The soft scurrying of footsteps along the bank of

the creek was Uncle Dick's only guide as he sprang to the door and began firing. From the darkness the outlaw's weapon spat back at him.

Gliding behind the shack, Uncle Dick reloaded, expecting every instant to find the bandit upon him. Not until some moments had elapsed did he manage to recover his composure and reconstruct the tragedy.

It was all very simple. Baptiste had left the store to meet one of the outlaws sent to answer the signal. As was his custom he had arranged his death-trap and locked the door before setting forth up the creek. The meeting of Gentleman Ralph, himself, had surprised and unnerved the breed, so great was his fear of the man with a woman's voice. The bandit's anger over Baptiste's failure to murder Uncle Dick on the spot had further fed the breed's terror. Doubtless he knew the bandit never made idle threats. He had sensed an evil fate in the man's reproaches and had actually felt his life trembling in the balance.

Then followed the relenting and the expressed willingness to take a drink. Feeling he had been saved from the grave and only thinking to confirm the outlaw's less irascible mood, Baptiste had for the first time in his life forgotten to remove the rawhide thong from the nail before pushing in the door. When he had thrown back the door and stepped on the threshold he had received the terrible volley in his chest.

Gentleman Ralph, ignorant of what had happened and taking it for granted he was being led into an ambush, had fired two shots into the mangled body before fleeing.

"Dad-rot it!" exploded Uncle Dick, hurrying back to the front of the shack. "My shots from over here must 'a' made him believe all the more that he was being waylaid. Here I be sneaking round like a scared rabbit, as if he might pounce on me in the dark. I'll bet a jug he's hoofing it like sin to get out of this neighborhood, reckoning a whole posse is after him. Huh! Reckon I'll look about a bit."

Making a detour so as to cross the creek below the cabin, he forded and swung up-stream until he stood behind the store. Waiting a bit, he advanced to the rear of the building and looked through the small window. The store was empty. The musket had kicked loose from its supporting saplings and lay on the floor.

Sprawled out on his back, half over the threshold, was Baptiste, his body shattered by the handful of heavy slugs. Uncle Dick was strongly tempted to enter the place and search it for some fresh clues to the membership of the gang. To do so was to invite detection. He weighed the chances thoughtfully; then decided:

"Reckon I won't be more'n a dozen kinds of a fool. I can search this place on my return from the Arapaho village. Lordy, but that chap's voice gets on my nerves! It's like a nail scratching across a piece of glass. Baptiste, you was a miserable cuss, but your boss is a heap worse."

With this farewell to the dead trader he retraced his steps across the creek and returned to his horse and blanket in time to secure several hours of sleep before sunrise.

Approaching the site of Satanta's camp, the mountaineer sighted a smoke soon after sunrise. Made cautious by his recent experiences and inclined to suspect a trap or a surprise under plausible exteriors, he left his horse in order to scout ahead on foot.

What warriors were astir were huddled in their blankets around several small fires, intent on preparing their morning meal. One teepee bore a device which Uncle Dick believed to be that of a bear, the mark of Yellow Bear. Near this was a smaller teepee, and, as Uncle Dick watched, two figures emerged from it and mounted ponies. Uncle Dick hurried back to his horse, for there was no mistaking the two; they were women and one was white.

He paused to tighten a saddle-girth and his horse threw up his head. The mountaineer caught him by the nose just in time to suppress a whinny. His action had been instinctive, as he was perfectly willing his horse should betray his presence to his friends, but it was not the ponies in the Indian camp that had attracted the attention of Uncle Dick's mount.

Noting the pricked ears and eager gaze, Uncle Dick turned his head and was surprised to behold one of the station animals passing through the rock débris some distance to his left. A man was leading the animal but, as he wore a blanket Indian-fashion, he was not to be recognized.

The newcomer halted and stealthily studied the camp from behind a boulder; then he took something from his belt and examined it. His next move was to swing into the saddle and start openly for the teepees.

Uncle Dick also advanced, only riding more slowly. On leaving the last of the scattered rocks, he saw that the two women were approaching the newcomer's course at right angles. Uncle Dick now had no difficulty in recognizing the features of Miss Isobel and the Quail.

Suddenly the Quail discovered the stranger, seized the bridle of the girl's horse and came to a halt. Then, whirling the two animals about, she rode for the camp and as she rode she tore off her blanket and repeatedly raised it above her head with her right hand and swung it toward the ground, the Arapaho signal for "enemy."

The Indians, upon seeing the signal, sprang from their fires, flung themselves on to their ponies and raced madly to meet them.

All this time the stranger continued to advance, only as the women retreated he called out something. The onrushing Arapahoes divided to let the two women through and began firing at the stranger. The latter came to a halt and turned to gallop away. He had gone only a few rods, however, when Uncle Dick saw him slump forward, slip sidewise and crash to the ground, one foot held fast in the stirrup. The horse stopped and turned his head to learn what had happened, and, before Uncle Dick could gain the spot, the Indians had milled about the silent figure, yelling like demons, leaning low from the saddle and firing into the corpse. With a roar of rage Uncle Dick bore down on the group. Yellow Bear recognized him and interpreted his displeasure and called on his warriors to desist from mauling the dead man.

"What do you mean by shooting a man like that and then riddling his body like you were Kiowas?" cried Uncle Dick.

"He is a bad man. He was after the medicine-woman," informed Yellow Bear.

"How do you know that?" asked Uncle Dick.

"The Quail gave the sign for an enemy. We saw him riding after the two women. He tried to get away when we came up. We brought the medicine-woman here to keep her safe until Cut-Hand came."

Uncle Dick dismounted, released the dead man's imprisoned foot and pulled the blanket away from his head.

"Great Hen!" he barked. "It's one of my Mexicans—the one who tends gate!" Then in Arapaho: "The Blue-Cloud people are like foolish children. They see a man coming to their camp and they kill him."

The Indians now recognized the slain man as the Mexican at the station and were greatly taken back at their error. Yellow Bear could only defend the killing by repeating:

"The Quail gave the sign for an enemy. We believed other white men were hiding among the rocks—that they came after the medicine-woman."

"The poor devil was bringing some word to Miss Isobel," groaned Uncle Dick, bending and removing a paper from the Mexican's hand.

The Indians remained mounted, their gaze averted from their old friend. The mountaineer noticed the paper was addressed to Miss Isobel. Opening it, he was astounded to read:

Have the Quail bring you back to the station at once. Tell the Quail not to bring her people along. Can't feed them. No danger now. I will try to meet you near the mouth of the pass.

UNCLE DICK WOOTON.

"By gumfrey! If that ain't a ring-snorter!" choked Uncle Dick, glaring at the forged message. "No danger, eh? And the Injuns ain't wanted!"

Turning to the silent, uneasy circle of braves he sternly announced:

"Perhaps my brothers did right in shooting this man. The talking paper shows some one planned to steal the medicine-woman away from my Arapaho brothers."

Yellow Bear threw back his head, his eyes glittering, and sounded the death-cry. Uncle Dick reread the message and loudly complained in English:

"Of all the dunder-head luck! The Mexican's wiped out and can't tell me a thing. He can't read. He may have acted honest in fetching this writing, but if he was alive he could tell who give it to him. Hard to think he'd turn against me after all the years I've fed him."

Yellow Bear dropped from his pony, stooped over the dead man, touched the leather belt and gazed inquiringly up into the mountain man's worried face. The chief's keen gaze had detected a bit of white showing above the edge of the dead man's belt.

Uncle Dick promptly investigated and found a second message. It was addressed to Uncle Dick Wooton and it read:

UNCLE DICK:

Come to me. I'm a prisoner at a trading-store. An Indian who speaks English as well as any white man is on guard. Small creek runs by the store. Across the creek is an empty cabin. Masked men captured me in the pass and brought me here. Come at once, as they plan to move me to some other place. The Mexican followed us and is hiding outside the window. He will get this to you, he says. ISOBEL DELAND.

"Damn me!" snarled Uncle Dick, holding the messages together and noting that they were written by the same hand. "That's why the skunk—— But no, maybe he's innocent.

"He ain't noways to blame for what's writ in these, unless he knew all the time that there was crooked work going on. But that's why he stopped and looked 'em over—wanted to make sure he didn't have 'em mixed. Here's a small cross marked on the girl's message. If I only could have talked with him!"

"Cut-Hand's man carries more talking-papers?" asked Yellow Bear, staring curiously at the body.

"Don't see as how he had any call to be outfitted with more writings," mumbled Uncle Dick in English. "Reckon it's a good plan to make sure, though."

He rapidly searched the Mexican. Although he found no more messages, he did find several double eagles which had never come from the station strong box. A scratch along the edge of each told him they had come from the box of marked coins intrusted to Turkey Bill. They established the dead man's guilt beyond all question, for the sum was entirely too large for him to have earned honestly.

"The Arapahoes will bury him. Do not scalp him," he directed.

A clear voice calling his name aroused him from his painful meditations. Miss Isobel, a pistol-shot away, was restrained from approaching nearer by the hand of the Quail holding her pony.

"Why don't you answer, Uncle Dick? Who is it? Is he badly hurt? Why did they do it?" she cried.

"Be with you in a minute. He ain't suffering any," he shouted back. Then to the Quail: "Take the medicine-woman back to the teepee."

The Quail turned the girl's pony and, despite her remonstrance, removed her from the scene. Under Uncle Dick's directions the Indians wrapped the Mexican in his blanket, placed him across his horse and conveyed him among the rocks, where a shallow grave was hastily made in the hard soil and supplemented by a mound of stones. Crooked Arm—now known as the Man-Who-Strikes-Alone, because of his coup in the cañon—displayed a tendency to linger behind the burial party. Glimpsing Big Knife loitering on the edge of the circle, Uncle Dick imposed on him the responsibility of guarding the grave.

Then, riding beside Yellow Bear, he briefly related the nature of the two messages.

"Does Cut-Hand's medicine tell him who sent the talking papers by the *nihanatayeche*—yellow-hide?" asked the chief.

"Not yet," coldly retorted Uncle Dick. "If the Arapahoes had not been so fast to kill him I should have learned everything."

"Then the Arapaho tribal medicine shall tell us," confidently said the chief. "There are no secrets from the Turtle, the Corn and the Flat Pipe."

"That will be clever of them," was the morose reply but, being given in English, the chief missed the irony. "Some one planned to have the medicine-woman ride back with the Quail. They were to be captured near the mouth of the pass. It was also planned for the yellow-hide to find me and give me a paper that would send me to Baptiste's store, where I should ride into an ambush and be killed."

"Baptiste is bad. He did it," declared the chief.

"Not unless they can write talking papers in the spirit land," demurred Uncle Dick. He tersely explained how the trader had passed on. Then he brightened and added: "But there is a way to find out. One of the Arapahoes knows enough of the truth to set us right. I will talk with the Quail."

"The Quail has not said why we brought the medicine-woman here," complained the chief.

"She has waited to tell me," was the complacent answer.

Uncle Dick rode furiously down to the camp, the Indians streaming out behind him.

Isobel ran from the teepee, her face revealing the shock her nerves had sustained because of the tragedy. Throwing her arms about her protector's neck, she whispered:

"Who was the man? Why was he killed? I know he was killed."

"Then I won't lie any more. He was bad all

through. He planned to do you mischief. Good riddance to an evil dog! Don't bother your pretty head about him. Your troubles are about over."

"You won't tell me anything more?"

"I'll tell you everything I know when we get back to the station," he evaded. "I'm in a hurry to learn certain facts first. I've been rambling round quite promiscu's since I said good-by to you on top of Raton."

"It was very lonely after you and Mr. Peace both went away," she sighed. "When the Quail asked me to go riding I was glad to do so. But when we got down the pass and I began to think we were going too far, all her people came clattering after us and, without a word, they brought me here. The Quail has been very good to me, but she mustn't treat me like a child. She wouldn't give me any reason whatever for bringing me here."

"She wouldn't tell Yellow Bear, either," soothed Uncle Dick with a whimsical smile. "Injuns are close-mouthed at times. Now you just step back and let me talk to her alone. She'll tell me all about it. See she's waiting to let loose."

The girl retired and the Quail advanced until she and Uncle Dick stood beyond ear-shot of the curious warriors.

"Cut-Hand's ears are open," Uncle Dick gravely prompted as the woman remained silent.

"Bime-by, mebbe," replied the Quail.

"Talk your own tongue," commanded Uncle Dick, knowing that the woman's resort to her meager Eng-

lish betokened a stubbornness of spirit. "Why did you bring the white girl here?"

The Quail's flat face was extremely stupid in expression as she stared into the mountaineer's domineering eyes and replied in English: "Good here."

Deeply exasperated but forcing himself to an appearance of composure, Uncle Dick coaxed:

"The Quail has called Cut-Hand friend ever since she first saw him in the village of her people. She was very small—so high. She ran to him for presents when he came. She has worked in the mountain-lodge since she grew up to be a woman. Why did she bring the white girl here?"

"Tellum bime-by, mebbe."

"You knew the white girl was in danger? What was the danger?" he sternly insisted.

"Tellum bime-by. Sometime, mebbe." Then, pointing in the direction of the pass, she added: "Up there, damn' bad."

With that she waddled back to the girl, leaving Uncle Dick chewing his lips in helpless anger and conscious that Yellow Bear's grave features masked mocking thoughts.

To compel the Quail to speak, once she had made up her stolid mind to remain silent, was out of the question. The most ingenious devices for physical torture could not have elicited a word from her. Nor was this from sheer stubbornness of spirit, as he well knew. His knowledge of the Indian character permitted him to appreciate that there were some points which baffled the woman's understanding. Until she

could clear these up to her satisfaction she would divulge nothing. He also knew she never would have brought the girl to the lowlands unless the exigency had been great. After he and Peace had departed south she had discovered or suspected some vital menace at the station.

"It was that Mexican," soliloquized Uncle Dick. "She learned something that made her afraid of him—something she only partly understood. It was enough to send her down here where her people would have elbow-room for a fight. She was skeered of the Mexican when she quit the station. That's why she give the enemy sign the minute she clamped her eyes on him. But she won't talk till she gets good and ready—not even if I used blasting powder."

Yellow Bear came forward and pleasantly inquired:

"Cut-Hand knows all now?"

"Like hell!" Then courteously: "He waits for the Quail's medicine to grow stronger. We will have a talk about it after we have eaten."

"My young men say they find signs of the Kiowas near here. They say the White Bear's warriors are on the Purgatory."

"Settainte is in no hurry to get his presents from Colonel Leavenworth. He better look sharply or he'll hear the Long Knives' bugle playing the 'charge'!"

"The Arapahoes will go to Medicine Lodge and sign the treaty. The Kiowas brought us evil words, but we would not listen to them," solemnly declared the chief.

Uncle Dick remembered his difficulty in intruding on the conference between Satanta and the Arapahoes and smothered a grim smile.

"The medicine of the Stone Turtle watches over the Blue-Cloud people. War with the whites would wipe out the tribe."

Somewhat shamefaced, Uncle Dick rejoined the girl, who eagerly asked:

"What did the Quail tell you?"

"Stone walls ain't nothing alongside of a Injun's way of keeping the mouth shut," he ruefully confessed. "She told me nothing except it was better for you to be down here for a spell—or till I go back."

"We can return now?" she anxiously asked. "These people are very kind, but I don't like living in a skin tent."

"We'll start right after we've had something to eat," he promised.

He hastened to the circle of warriors in order to arrange for the return trip, informing Yellow Bear of his plan to start for the station almost immediately. To his amazement the chief heard him coldly and shook his head, saying:

"Another sleep. Then we go."

"You mean you won't go with me to-day?" indignantly demanded Uncle Dick.

"One more sleep. Then we will go."

"Take your sleep and be damned! The medicine-woman and I start to-day."

"Cut-Hand's pony is very tired."

"My pony hasn't sweat a hair. The girl will ride

the station pony which the yellow-hide rode down here. I'm not asking you for any ponies."

"My young men say the ponies have walked away. They will hunt for them and find them after another sleep," was the imperturbable reply.

Impelled by a fresh suspicion, Uncle Dick began looking for his horse. The animal had disappeared, nor could he see the Mexican's mount. For some reason the chief had determined to keep him and Miss Isobel in amiable captivity overnight. He firmly believed the Quail was responsible for this behavior and, without a word to the chief, he repaired to the teepee of the women and called the Quail by name.

She crawled forth, as blank of visage as when he had attempted to learn her reason for bringing the girl down the pass. Sternly warning her he would stand no more nonsense, he reiterated his intention of starting for the station.

"Do you go with me or stay behind with your people?" he demanded.

She tilted her head on one side and closed her eyes in a pantomime of sleep. Then said in English:

"Then go."

"You have talked to Yellow Bear. He stays here one sleep because you told him something," he accused.

"Up there damn' bad. One sleep—all good," she answered in a monotonous sing-song; then turned and crawled back into the teepee.

"I'm ready to start at any time, Uncle Dick," called out Miss Isobel from the depths of the teepee. "And I'm very impatient, too."

"Uh-huh," mumbled Uncle Dick, filling his pipe. "Sorry to disapp'int you, little girl, but I've arranged to stick along here for another night. Few things I want to look into."

He hurried away to escape her questions and, as he viciously puffed his pipe, he mumbled:

"Both of us prisoners along of some whim that's crawled into that squaw's thick head. Well, thank the Lord, they're Arapahoes and not Kiowas."

While he killed time and endeavored to quiet Miss Isobel's curiosity and coax her from her impatient mood, a warrior of the Blue-Cloud people was riding like a streak at the command of the medicine of the Stone Turtle, the Ear of Corn and the Sacred Flat Pipe. Dark forces were at work along the foot of Raton Range against this tribal medicine. And all this—the galloping warrior, the greed of bandits, the chagrin of an old mountain man and the impatience of a fair girl—had resulted because, once upon a time, a regiment of Spanish soldiers had vanished, and because a certain river had taken a name to commemorate the mysterious tragedy.

CHAPTER X

THE RIVER OF LOST SOULS

MORNING found the Arapahoes uncommunicative as to their plans. The Quail refused to converse in her native tongue and took refuge in broken English when interrogated by Uncle Dick. Yellow Bear persisted in his transparent subterfuge of being unable to find the mountaineer's horses. And yet, as the day advanced, Uncle Dick perceived the chief and the Quail were marking time, as if awaiting some dénouement. At last Yellow Bear came to where Uncle Dick was half asleep in the shadow of the women's teepee and announced:

"They say my young men have found Cut-Hand's horses."

"Good!" exclaimed Uncle Dick, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "The medicine of the Turtle is very strong. Now we can go."

"The Arapahoes will ride with Cut-Hand. Cut-Hand's horses have wandered far and are tired. We must ride slow."

Uncle Dick gravely agreed to the wisdom of this, and stood up to look about for his animals. His horse and the one ridden into camp by the renegade Mexican

showed no signs of exhaustion; rather, they appeared to be in the pink of condition. However, Yellow Bear's polite fiction was intended to cover some serious precaution, and the mountaineer was now reconciled to playing the game according to the rules laid down by his friends.

Miss Isobel came from the teepee with the Quail at her heels. The girl's flushed face betrayed impatience and a touch of irritation. She eagerly demanded:

"Is it true we can go home? The Quail says so, I think, only her English is hard to understand at times. And, Uncle Dick, she—she swears—sometimes!"

"Shoo! That can't be!" cried Uncle Dick in mock horror. "The Injuns must have taught her."

The Quail waddled to them and turned her imperturbable countenance toward the pass, as she informed:

"Now damn' good up there."

"Are you ready to talk?" asked Uncle Dick in Arapaho.

She stared at him stupidly and replied in English:

"Bime-by, mebbe."

"She ain't ready and wild horses couldn't hurry her," growled Uncle Dick. "My dear, some folks will tell you that the whites learned the Injuns to swear. It ain't so. It's such ways of acting as the Quail's shown the last twenty-four hours that taught the white man to cuss. Anyway, we'll soon be getting out of this."

Uncle Dick brought up his horses and then was forced to wait while Yellow Bear leisurely saw to it that the teepees were struck and the poles of each tied in two bunches. Rawhide ropes were passed through holes

made in the upper ends of the poles, and a bunch of poles was lashed on each side of a pony.

To the impatient mountain man and the girl, the chief appeared to be overparticular in arranging, in front of the saddle, the rawhide rope that brought the ends of the poles across the pony's shoulders. What was ordinarily the work of a few minutes was tediously dawdled over and protracted. Next came the work of lashing the teepee coverings over the poles behind the ponies, so as to form litters. This, also, was done so painstakingly as to leave no doubt as to the chief's desire to kill time. Contrary to custom, the Quail did not help in the work but stood with her face turned toward the east, her small eyes searching for something.

Finally the last teepee had been reduced to a travois and the Quail muttered something to Yellow Bear and climbed on to a litter. The chief motioned for Isobel to do likewise, but the girl flamed out in rebellion and flatly announced:

"I will ride a horse."

Uncle Dick repeated this to Yellow Bear, who darted a glance at the blank visage of the Quail and then repeated his gestured command. For an answer the girl sprang on to a horse and cantered toward the river. Uncle Dick chuckled aloud, glad that his stubborn friends should be taught a lesson in independence of spirit, and mounted his own animal. The effect on the Quail, however, was remarkable. With an agility one would never expect of her, she leaped from the travois, caught a warrior's pony and was astride and off at a gallop, signaling for the Indians to follow.

The Indians ran to their ponies and Uncle Dick raced away, with his friends streaming after him. He had been amused at Isobel's defiance; now he was afraid. This was because the Quail was taking the situation very seriously, as was shown by her desperate efforts to overtake the runaway. Uncle Dick shouted for the girl to halt, and by this time the Indians were giving voice and the Quail was squalling commands and exhortations, but Isobel heard nothing intelligible in the confusion. To her it was a game. Forced to inactivity, her high spirits now had full play. Rejoicing in the freedom of action, she welcomed the chase, waved her hand defiantly and shrilly urged her mount to greater efforts.

The pursuit quickly entered a stretch of broken country, where low, bald sand-hills and scattered rocks frequently hid the quarry from the chase. The Quail increased her exhibition of alarm. The direction taken by the girl and the course of the river formed, some miles distant, the converging sides of a triangle.

"That squaw's afraid of the river! If the fool had only told me things, instead of keeping her mouth shut, I'd know what to look out for," muttered Uncle Dick.

Having started ahead of the Indians, he was riding next behind the Quail, a hundred yards between them. Close on his heels rode Yellow Bear, his men strung out behind him. While glancing over his shoulder, Uncle Dick was off his guard for a moment and his horse stepped in a hole. Uncle Dick was thrown but fortunately landed on sand.

As he lay on his back, pumping for breath, Yellow

Bear flashed by without a glance at his dismounted friend. The mountain man crawled to his feet and examined his horse. The animal was able to walk and that was all. Several other warriors had passed, all of them ignoring him. Uncle Dick jumped before a pony and waved his hat, calling on the warrior to take him up behind. With the quickness of a cat the pony swerved aside and raced on. In the fleeting glimpse of his face Uncle Dick recognized the Man-Who-Strikes-Alone, formerly Crooked Arm, now burning with lust to give his chief a race for the grand climax and count a coup.

"Hey!" yelled Uncle Dick, flinging up his arms and gesturing frantically at the line of warriors now speeding by him and sprinkling him with sand.

With their eager faces glaring to the front, each holding a revolver or a breech-loading rifle high above the head, none gave him any heed. In desperation the mountain man raised his rifle and covered one of the rearmost figures, that of Big Knife. This brave's sojourn at the station had covered him with fat and depleted his ambition, so the menacing muzzle brought him to a plunging halt.

"Hop down! Quick!" bellowed Uncle Dick, now in a sweat of fear as he perceived that not only the girl and the Quail had swept out of sight, but also the bulk of the warriors.

Big Knife grunted resignedly and fell off his pony. Uncle Dick sprang into the saddle and with a kick of his heel sent the animal scurrying onward. The pony was swift and sure of foot and his rider's zeal to head

the chase soon carried him among the Indians, but except for brief glimpses Yellow Bear and the two women remained hidden from view as they wound in and out among the clutter of rocks or up and down over the low sand-ridges.

With the exception of a few of the foremost braves, the Indians rode in single file, the head of the flying procession regulating the speed of the others. Disgusted at being pocketed in the rear, Uncle Dick decided to chance a short-cut and swerved aside toward the river.

Unless overtaken, the meandering course of the girl would bring her to the Purgatory. The path the mountain man proposed to take was to the course of the others as is the cord to a tautly strung bow. He yelled to the Indians behind to follow him, but either they did not understand or else they preferred to stick to the eccentric path, for, after a half a mile of reckless scrambling, the mountaineer's pony had left the body of the chase to one side. Uncle Dick ascended a sand-mound and watched for the women and Yellow Bear to appear.

As he looked, he heard the general chorus of the pursuit change in timbre and become a series of explosive yells, quickly accentuated by the banging of guns. Beyond the mound was a higher cone of sand and up this the mountain man drove his pony. His range of view was now widened and he could catch flitting glimpses of the Arapahoes. He saw they were dismounting and taking cover, at the same time firing their guns. Puzzled and greatly alarmed, he waited;

then a line of ponies swept into sight beyond the Arapahoes. Each pony carried an Indian clinging to the animal's side and firing from under his neck.

"Hell! Kiowas!" he snarled, fidgeting with his rifle. "What's their game? Satanta must be crazy to fetch a war-pipe against the Arapahoes!"

He tried to count the galloping ponies as they wove back and forth, and estimated their number to be no more, if as many, as that of his friends. "It ain't like 'em!" he fumed. "They can't expect to stampede any ponies in a daylight attack. What can Satanta be thinking of?"

Another peculiarity of the attack quickly impressed him. The two bands were inflicting no injury on each other. The Kiowas kept beyond accurate rifle-range and seemed to be satisfied with holding the Arapahoes to the rocks.

"It's a game old Satanta is up to!" yelled Uncle Dick, as if he could make his friends hear. "He's only hoping to hold up my Injuns, and, by Hen, he's doing it!"

The Arapahoes now realized the futility of such warfare and, having learned the maximum strength of their assailants, mounted their ponies to carry the fighting into the open. As they began riding from cover, Uncle Dick caught the faint notes of a bugle, and the Kiowas commenced drawing back. Encouraged at this demonstration of weakness, the Arapahoes howled triumphantly and pressed forward.

"Playing the game just as that old devil of a Satanta planned 'em to," groaned Uncle Dick.

The whole business was bewildering. It was scarcely conceivable that the head of the Kiowa nation should open war on the Arapahoes because of their refusal to join the proposed alliance of plains tribes against the whites. If war between the two tribes were to be a fact, why should the Kiowas lose the great advantage of a surprise attack? This open betrayal of their hostile intentions won Satanta nothing.

The mystery deepened as Uncle Dick saw his friends being decoyed farther into the open ground. There was no wood nor rocks beyond, within strategic distance, where an ambush could be waiting. And had there been any such point, the Kiowas had no men to work the trap. Uncle Dick had learned Satanta's strength when he had visited the chief's lodge, and he knew that all of Satanta's men were participating in this senseless attack and soon must retreat in earnest, or be badly whipped by the Arapahoes.

Nevertheless, the indubitable fact remained that Satanta never moved without a purpose. Now he was eliminating the bulk of the Arapahoes from their pursuit of Miss Isobel. Consequently his purpose must be connected with the girl, reasoned Uncle Dick. Then all the more need of haste in throwing protectors about her, was the logical conclusion, and his pony slid down the cone on his haunches and was sent along a course that ran parallel to the river.

A half-mile, and the broken ground was cut by a ribbon of grassland. It led like a lane from the open plains to the river, perhaps marking the ancient bed of a tributary of the Purgatory. It was about a mile in

width at its widest point and was fenced in on the farther side by rough broken country.

As Uncle Dick came to this comparatively smooth area, he beheld Isobel, the Quail and Yellow Bear. The girl was well advanced toward the river, her flight apparently forced in that direction by the forbidden rocky waste beyond. She had halted her panting pony and was looking back toward the sound of the fighting.

The Quail was flogging her pony in an anxious endeavor to reach her. The chief was riding furiously at a considerable distance behind the Quail and, like her, Uncle Dick observed, he kept his head turned toward the northeast, entirely ignoring the firing behind him.

"Girl's scared and don't want to run away no more. She's afraid to turn back because of the fighting. The chief and the squaw are more afraid of the rocks over across than of what's happening back along—— Jumping Hen!"

Uncle Dick drove his heels into his pony's ribs as a party of six horsemen suddenly dashed from the rocks across the opening. They were white men and were galloping to cut in between the two women and the chief. Their horses were fresh and Yellow Bear's pony was tired.

As Uncle Dick rode forward to cut in ahead of the chief, the latter began firing his rifle at the white men. Without drawing rein, they returned his fire. The Quail, now almost up to the girl, began shooting at the strangers with a revolver. Isobel wheeled her pony and rode toward the river, the only avenue open to her.

Uncle Dick was now near enough to observe that

one of the strangers wore a black mask, while his followers had their faces half covered with handkerchiefs. The mountaineer halted his pony and, with great care, covered a bobbing figure. He fired and two men went down. With a whoop of encouragement he turned to wave congratulations to the chief, but was amazed to behold him galloping along with a revolver in his hand, having discarded his rifle.

"Some shooting!" yelped Uncle Dick. "Nails a man with a revolver at that distance while both are going hellity-brindle! Couldn't do it again in a million years! But he don't seem to take no pride in it. Not a single howl. Well, that cuts 'em down to four."

Now the masked horsemen took notice of the mountaineer and one drew rein and fired with deliberate care. Uncle Dick heard the bullets but did not pause to return them. The mystery of the Kiowa attack was plain. Gentleman Ralph had induced the disgruntled Satanta to aid in the abduction of the girl to the extent of keeping the Arapahoes busy while the outlaws carried her off. Isobel's display of independence had furnished the road-agents with a most excellent opportunity.

Yellow Bear had now begun singing his death-song and discharging his revolver without any effect. The outlaws no longer concerned themselves with the chief but sent all their lead in Uncle Dick's direction. One would halt and empty his gun and then dash forward, while another stopped to repeat the tactics. But, because of the distance and the difficulty of hitting a man on a galloping horse, none of the bullets registered, and the mountain man grimly withheld the fire.

Suddenly there came a puff of smoke from the rocks above the point where the outlaws had broken from cover, and one of the outlaws threw up his hands in salute to death and fell from his horse.

"Godfrey! It was him, whoever he may be, and not the chief that emptied that saddle along with me!" hoarsely cried Uncle Dick.

This assault on their right caused something of a panic among the remaining three men. They paid no further attention to the mountaineer but concentrated all their efforts on reaching the girl. To remind them he was still in the game, and because the ally hidden among the rocks made him less niggardly with his lead, Uncle Dick now began shooting, but without halting his pony. None of his shots took effect and they only served to quicken the outlaws' pace. The man in the rocks fired twice but failed to score.

The position of the masked men was now hopeless, unless they could overtake the two women and use them as shields. Behind them rode Yellow Bear, shouting hoarsely. On either side was a deadly enemy, as proved by the three empty saddles. Nor was the quarry ahead to be captured with impunity, even when overtaken, for the Quail, now close behind the girl, half turned in her saddle, revolver partly raised, holding her fire for close quarters.

In a final effort to run the women down, the man in the black mask drew a bit ahead of his two companions and as he rode he raised his rifle and began firing. The Quail's pony collapsed in a heap, throwing the squaw heavily.

A bugle sounded among the rocks, and Uncle Dick groaned aloud and watched for Satanta and his braves to break from cover and make the chase hopelessly uneven. Again the bugle rang out and the black-cloaked figure, now almost up to the girl, glanced behind him.

Into the open dashed the horsemen, making a brave show in their cavalry uniforms.

"More of Ralph's devils made up as soldiers!" gritted Uncle Dick.

Yellow Bear came to a halt, undecided as to what to do. Uncle Dick flogged his weary pony on. The newcomers swerved into line behind the outlaws and, to Uncle Dick's astonishment and great joy, began shooting. That this was no make-believe was evidenced by the hindmost outlaw's plunging from his saddle. His mate frantically raced along beside his chief. As the two swept by the Quail, she raised her revolver and fired, but they swung low from the saddle and kept on.

They overhauled Isobel, one riding at each side of her, Gentleman Ralph grasping her pony by the bits. Uncle Dick glanced toward the cavalrymen now pounding in pursuit, but restrained himself from shooting, for fear of hitting the girl. During the brief interval while he was watching Gentleman Ralph overtake the girl, the cavalrymen had gained an addition to their number, a man wearing the peaked hat of a Mexican.

The girl and her captors turned down-stream on reaching the river bank and vanished behind the shoulder of a high ledge. They were making for the narrow path that led into the cañon.

As the troopers gallantly took the bend, Uncle Dick fell in beside Yellow Bear. When the two came to the ledge they beheld the soldiers, with the Mexican in the lead, following the narrow path in single file, but there was no sign of the outlaws and their prisoners. Above the roar of the tumbling waters the bugle sounded, and the troopers dismounted and advanced on foot. Uncle Dick followed their example but Yellow Bear remained in the saddle.

Far ahead a twisted pine clung to the edge of the path, its stunted and distorted arms waving in the breeze as if warning the troopers to fall back.

Yellow Bear leaned from the saddle, his face grave with fear of the supernatural, and cried in Uncle Dick's ear:

"Bad medicine! Bad for the Indian! Bad for the white men!"

"It's going to be damn' bad for them two rips that stole my girl," bawled back Uncle Dick, and, trailing his rifle, he advanced at a trot and came up with the troopers.

He had just reached the pine when a rifle cracked and a soldier went down with a bullet through his leg. The men scrambled to cover, taking the wounded man with them. Uncle Dick assumed the post of surgeon and found the leg was broken.

"I'm Dick Wooton of Raton Pass," he briefly explained. "How did you boys get wind of this?"

"Pass the word down the line to Lieutenant Camp that Uncle Dick Wooton of Raton Pass is here," called out a trooper.

The message was repeated and after a few minutes young Lieutenant Camp stealthily gained the boulder behind which the mountain man was concealed.

The lieutenant explained.

"A young Arapaho rode in with a message from Yellow Bear. Said that Satanta was up this way and about to kick up trouble. We wouldn't have placed much stock in it if any one but Yellow Bear had sent the warning. The bugle hadn't any more than sounded 'boots and saddle' before a white man came—he's ahead with a big hat on—and told us the same thing and more. He can introduce himself to you.

"Enough to say his word was sufficient to bring us humping, even if we hadn't believed the Arapaho. You sent some word to Colonel Leavenworth, didn't you? I knew it because an Arapaho runner brought your message to me and I hustled it along. It's known at the fort that you tipped him off about Satanta being up here. How's your leg?" The last was spoken to the wounded man.

"Damn that leg! It'll keep me out of the wind-up," growled the trooper.

"You'll be so close to the wind-up you won't miss much," encouraged the lieutenant. Then to Uncle Dick: "Do you know what sort of place they're hiding in?"

Uncle Dick pointed to the twisted pine, nearly abreast of their position, and informed him:

"About fifty-six paces from that is a deep opening under the cliff. Gentleman Ralph's gang has been using it for a hiding-place. Reckon they're in that."

The lieutenant whistled and admitted:

"Well, that makes it kind of binding." Then determinedly: "But the skunks must be dug out."

From ahead came a thin, whimpering voice that shrilly penetrated the babel of the river. It announced:

"You all go back or we'll kill the girl; then we'll kill ourselves."

"The hell-hound! He'll do it, too, lieutenant," groaned Uncle Dick. "Tell him he can go scot-free if he'll send the girl to us."

"If I don't bag that man," the lieutenant was growling, when the wailing voice broke in, saying:

"You've got just five minutes to clear out in."

"He's crawled out of his hole and is behind one of those rocks!" yelled a trooper ahead.

"Yes, I crawled out here but I'm going to walk back," promptly informed the high-pitched voice. "If I don't get back my partner will do for the girl."

He rose from his hiding-place, a black-cloaked figure with a black mask concealing his features. Turning leisurely, he faced toward the opening under the cliff and called over his shoulder:

"About four minutes left now. Remember, no extra time allowed."

Lieutenant Camp called to his bugler to sound "retreat," garnishing the command with several oaths. The bugler raised his instrument to his lips. Gentleman Ralph turned and was laughing in shrill mockery, when his companion's head appeared for a few moments and he called out something. The bandit leader plunged toward the opening, shouting:

"You cursed fool! Get back in there!"

But the man in the Mexican hat, crouching in advance of the foremost of the troopers, leaped to his feet with a yell of triumph and cried:

"T'other feller says the girl has disappeared! She's dodged them!"

"Forward! Rush them!" bawled the lieutenant, dashing ahead.

Gentleman Ralph appeared for a moment and fired a shot at the men now quitting their hiding-places.

"The girl's still in there. In a little cave in back of the main room!" Uncle Dick cried in the lieutenant's ear.

"Dead men's bones! Bad medicine!" bleated Yellow Bear, yet urging his pony forward.

Guns cracked from the mouth of the opening and two troopers went down. Uncle Dick advanced regardless of consequences, keeping abreast of the young lieutenant and intending to be the first under the cliff. The Mexican was ahead of him and, as he caught a glimpse of the shoulders and peaked hat, he was curiously reminded of the drunken Mexican who had stood at the Happy Fortune Bar. With his revolver ready, he bowed his head and raced the lieutenant to the opening.

"You let her go, damn you!" raged a deep strident voice inside. Obviously the voice of Gentleman Ralph and yet not a bit like his.

"Liar! Take that for clubbin' me in the cañon!" roared a second voice.

As Uncle Dick gained the opening he was in time to see the man in the black cloak go down in a heap.

His slayer, now minus any face covering, swung about, but the Mexican was a second the quicker. His peaked hat gave a jerk and the outlaw dropped beside his chief.

The troopers now swarmed in while Yellow Bear remained outside to chant a song-prayer in which he invoked the evil spirits of the place to pass him by in their distribution of bad luck. Uncle Dick dropped beside the man killed by the Mexican and grunted:

"Chuckle-Luck! Did for his boss before he got his!"

Lieutenant Camp now tore the mask from the other man, and Uncle Dick gave an incredulous cry and fell back, both hands over his eyes:

"Good lord! It can't be possible!" he groaned. "Joe Peace—Gentleman Ralph! Gentleman Ralph—Joe Peace. Oh, I'm glad it wa'n't my lead that had to get him!"

"I've suspected it for some time," said a calm voice behind him, "but I wasn't sure till within the last forty-eight hours."

The voice was very familiar. Uncle Dick turned and slowly looked up into the face shaded by the big hat. It required a second glance before he recognized in the dark, stained features the face of Sam Keene.

"I give in. I don't *sabe* much," he mumbled dully.

"I wanted to tell you certain things I suspected when you invited me to the station, Mr. Wooton, but you were so friendly with this man, believed in him so thoroughly, I didn't dare yip till I had absolute proof. Not that I suspected at that time that he was boss of the gang, but I believed he was a member."

"Would you kindly tell an old man who'n hell you might be?" timidly asked Uncle Dick.

"Oh, I've used my own name, Sam Keene. Sent here by the Overland to clean things up a bit. But we're forgetting the girl! The soldiers don't seem to find her."

With a little cry of alarm Uncle Dick hurried to the rear of the recess where the lieutenant was conducting a blind search. Uncle Dick fumbled along the wall; then some one lighted a splinter of wood and he found it. The crack measured a little over a foot in width and extended diagonally across the rock. Thrusting his head through this, he called her by name. There was no response and he repeated it, this time adding:

"Old Uncle Dick, honey, come to take you home. Everything is all right. Don't be skeered. Every one out here is a friend."

Out of the inner darkness came two plump arms which locked about the mountain man's neck. Then her head came into the torchlight and she and the old mountaineer formed a pleasing tableau for the troopers.

"I was looking for a hole close to the floor, miss," cried the lieutenant, snatching off his hat and bowing low.

Twisting his head about without escaping the encircling arms, Uncle Dick glared at the forms on the floor and from the corner of his mouth ordered:

"Blankets! Douse that light!"

When the dead men were covered up and the light extinguished, permitting the shadows and gloom of the place to return, Keene spoke up, saying:

"You'll find it more comfortable to come outside, Miss Isobel, to finish hugging Uncle Dick."

The arms about the abashed mountain man's neck tightened convulsively. Then the girl glided through the opening, rejoicing:

"That's Mr. Keene's voice. I'm so glad!"

The troopers had made their camp back from the point where the pursuit turned into the river-path. The Quail had her charge at one side and Keene took the opportunity to explain to Uncle Dick:

"When I commenced the job I looked the ground over from both ends. We knew that the Ralph of California fame was dead, but the fact that the new leader took the name suggested he must be one who had been in California while Ralph was active there. I was looking for such a man when I decided there were two possible ways of working into the truth: Through Turkey Bill or through Baptiste. Turkey Bill was keeping a woman and spending a lot more money on her than his pay would explain. Baptiste was born bad and was sure to know something about the gang if its headquarters was near his trading-store. I had just one man in my confidence, the sheriff at Las Vegas. He watched that end of the trail while I worked up here.

"I think I made a mistake in going to Muddy Creek. It attracted Peace's attention to me. Of course I didn't know anything about Peace then and was going it blind. But I can see that his agents must have reported about me to him. I was a stranger. Baptiste was easy to fool. He believed I was turning trader because

I didn't dare go back to the States. I planned to get into the gang through him. I hated to make a row over the buckskin pouch found on Boy Charlie, but I thought it might contain some important evidence and that the breed would make way with it.

"Still, even the duel wouldn't have spoiled my game with him and I would have kept on playing trader and getting into his confidence if you hadn't arrived and begun firing questions about a white woman and the outlaws. Both Baptiste and I had heard about the white woman from Indians. After you'd asked your questions and told us it was Boy Charlie we had buried, I was anxious to talk more with you.

"Baptiste knew it was Boy Charlie who had died on our hands, but I didn't, until you told us. So I wanted to get settled at your station, pose as a prospector and scour the country round the pass. If Gentleman Ralph was keeping tabs on me my history would be straight—failure as a trader and now trying gold-hunting.

"Before you came I'd dogged Baptiste and knew he used to meet some of the gang, but I wanted to get in on the inside where I could meet the leader. I had some different rigs hidden in my shack and when I went south to see the Las Vegas sheriff and keep tabs on Turkey Bill, I wore different kinds of clothes. Then I went up to the station and saw the young lady. Well, you stopped me talking to her and Peace got ugly.

"Peace didn't size up good to me. He didn't ring true as a prospector. I suspected from the first that he was hooked up with the gang. Then the girl was

stolen and he asked me to go with him to gun for robbers. He suggested we separate and take opposite sides of the pass. First thing I knew he was shootin' at me."

"Why, he told me that you shot at him," broke in Uncle Dick.

"I'm not surprised," smiled Keene. "The first bullet satisfied me he was behind the gun that fired it, and that proved to me he was one of the gang. Then the suspicion began to grow up that he was the leader, Gentleman Ralph. Convinced he was at least one of the gang I believed he couldn't be away from it so much unless he was the boss. I had known right along that the leader wasn't always with the gang and it had puzzled me to imagine where he was staying.

"After separating from Peace in the pass that night, I tried to find him next morning. I put a handkerchief over my face and rode down the road, hoping to spot one of the outlaws and have him mistake me for a pal. If I could catch one of them I was confident I could make him squeal on the others. I met one of the gang and he surprised me by beginning to shoot. I chased him down the road, swapping bullets. That man was Peace."

"Then he had one of his men hold up the coach and send me the note signed, 'Gentleman Ralph.' I'd reckoned it was one of his men that did that," mumbled Uncle Dick, only he did not add that his reason for thinking this was because he had believed Keene to be the leader of the bandits.

"The note demanding the surrender of the girl was

a play to get me away from the station. Perhaps he thought you, too, might go along to catch some of the gang when they held up the coach to get your answer. After decoying us away to hunt robbers, he would slip back and steal the girl. He did that.

"I think that from the beginning of my coming to the station he was uneasy about me. Then came the fight in the cañon. I was hiding on the trail that enters the upper end. I was there when they rode through after being licked by your Indians. Peace was whining and cursing and I knew he had been hit."

Uncle Dick interrupted to tell of seeing Peace in the cañon, posing as a prisoner. Keene remarked:

"I reckon he was taken back when he saw you. He didn't know how many were with you, or how you got in there. He was Gentleman Ralph and riding toward the mouth of the cañon when he first saw you. He wanted to get clear, even if he had to leave the girl, but the Arapahoes, who were behind him, got in front of him and then he had to fall back. He was afraid of the reception he'd meet when passing the shack. That's why he had one of his men wear his mask and cloak while he wound a rope about his body and pretended to be a prisoner. He fooled you and you quit firing for fear of hitting him. He quit the gang at the head of the cañon and rode back alone. It was when he returned that he was cursing about his arm."

"Got plugged after he shot Detel!" interpolated Uncle Dick.

"You understand I never saw him unmasked till to-day," continued Keene. "After showing up before

you in the cañon as a prisoner, he put on his cloak and mask, but because of the darkness, I couldn't have recognized him even if he had been unmasked. The gang scattered that night. I followed at random, hoping to keep on the leader's trail, but he slipped away on one of the back trails."

"Played off he was knocked out of his senses by falling from the horse. One of my Mexicans was in his pay and helped him into the station," growled Uncle Dick.

"When morning came I was south of the pass, chasing Chuckle-Luck and some of the others. I still believed Gentleman Ralph was ahead. I lost the trail; then picked it up outside of Whoa-Haw. I saw you the minute I entered the Happy Fortune——"

"Mexican! Peaked hat!"

"And very drunk," added Keene with a whimsical grin. "You really owe me something for shooting out the lights and dropping Shorty.

"It was on my last trip south that I arranged with the company to send the box of marked coins. The Las Vegas sheriff took care of that end of it and arrested Turkey Bill and myself. Bill was just ready to give up everything when the gang killed him."

"Say, you wasn't in any danger of being hung at all!" cried Uncle Dick.

"Not so long as the sheriff was on the job. But when I saw them shoot him down I'll admit I got scared. After they fired through the window and did for Bill, the rest was easy.

"I followed the trail up here and got in touch with

Lieutenant Camp as it was a part of my plan to use the troopers in combing the country along the Purgatory. The Arapaho messenger from Yellow Bear was ahead of me with word that Satanta was raising the devil, so the troopers were on the way when I found them. There's no doubt but what Peace bribed Satanta to keep the Arapahoes busy while he stole the girl again."

"And there's no doubt but what he wrote the two notes the Mexican tried to deliver," said Uncle Dick bitterly, producing the messages for inspection. "He had started the notes on their way before he learned about my affair with Baptiste."

"Isobel is her real name?"

"Isobel Deland."

Lowering his voice, Uncle Dick related the girl's history.

"Peace was taken with her," mused Keene. "Who wouldn't be?" he added with a sigh. "But he was crazy to get gold. Now I understand why he was so determined to steal her. To think it was his trying to get her secret that brought him to his death! And all the time the gold was within a few feet of where his gang was hiding. I said you owed me something for shooting out the lights in the Happy Fortune. Pay up! I want a chance to talk with her."

Uncle Dick pursed his lips thoughtfully. Finally he said:

"Keene, I done you wrong in thinking certain thoughts. Now I know you're all right, but the girl ain't had time to catch her breath. The talking must

wait, I reckon, till she shows some hankering to be talked to. We'll let it go at that."

"You're the boss," said Keene, rising. "I think I've gone over about everything. Are you going to cover up the truth about Peace?"

"No! The truth wasn't kept covered about her uncle. The Joe Peace I used to know never lived. I don't see why his true natur' should be kept hid. Then again, every one else will know about it and she'd be sure to find out. The quicker she knows just what he was the better it will be."

"Amen!"

This was spoken so heartily that Uncle Dick stared round-eyed; then dryly observed:

"I was forgetting that you two was sort of jealous of each other."

"I'm almost jealous of him now," replied Keene, turning away to join Lieutenant Camp.

Uncle Dick stood a moment looking after the young man and chuckling. Then he went to look for Yellow Bear.

Uncle Dick found Yellow Bear welcoming his warriors, who had just straggled in.

"Where is Satanta?" he asked.

"My men say he and his warriors ran away," haughtily replied the chief.

"Satanta knew about some bones under the cliff and was afraid of them."

"The bones are bad medicine," answered the chief.

"The Arapahoes have known about them for a long time?"

"The medicine of the bones got Little Pony when he rode after the medicine-woman."

"You kept us in your camp to give your man time to bring the Long Knives."

"Satanta was near the mouth of the pass, waiting to get the medicine-woman."

"Why are those bones bad medicine?"

Yellow Bear hesitated for a minute or so, then said:

"It isn't talked about among the Indians. To speak of it brings bad luck. But the medicine of the white woman is stronger than the medicine of the bones. A very long time ago, when the new grass was up, some Spanish soldiers marched down this river, going to the Arkansas. They were attacked by Kiowas and by a few—a very few Arapahoes. Those who were not killed in the first attack fell back to the river and entered the cañon. They hid in the hole under the cliff. There was the river very near and they had no water. Many were killed trying to get water.

"After it was all over the Kiowas found the hole through the wall and put them in there so their bones might not be found by other soldiers and war made on us. Before the leaves dropped off the trees in the mountains, many Kiowas and Arapahoes died of smallpox. The soldiers had it. We lost many fighting men. We never go near that place where the bones are."

"I see," murmured Uncle Dick. "The River of Lost Souls. Of course. But why did the Quail take the girl from the station?"

"Ask the Quail," advised the chief, his face lowering, so Uncle Dick deduced he did not know the reason.

Uncle Dick went to the Quail and this time found her ready to talk. It was all over; no one was left to harm Preety. It was all very simple. By accident she had seen Peace talking with the Mexican who tended the gate. Their manner had been so stealthy that she had spied on them. She had seen Peace give the Mexican a paper and so she followed the latter down the toll-road and up the slope. There he had made a small smoke and very soon a man, a stranger who wore many revolvers in his belt, joined him. The Mexican gave this man the paper and then returned to the station, where he reported to Peace. This was the day before Peace rode to the south after the mountaineer.

After Peace departed, the Mexican slipped away from the station a second time and again the Quail followed him. This time he went as far as Devil's Elbow and made a smoke, one that would last some time, and then hurried back to the station. The first signal had called a man from the bush to get a talking-paper. The second was left to burn. She reasoned that if the second smoke was to call any one, it would call the one who had received the paper. The talking-paper had been some order; the second smoke was another order. Instantly she had become alarmed for Preety. Instinct, which she called medicine, told her to fly. That was all.

Uncle Dick returned to the troopers and sought out the lieutenant, who was smoking a pipe with Keene. The mountaineer briefly explained how the girl had

found the nuggets and expressed a desire to take advantage of the soldiers' presence to search for more gold.

"By all means!" eagerly agreed the lieutenant. "Only don't advertise it as a gold-hunt, or some of my men will be deserting. Mr. Keene and I will go with you. We three ought to be enough. I'll get some wood for torches. It'll be great fun. Here's hoping the young lady nets a million out of it!"

"The no-talk-to-Miss-Isobel rule holds good for the lieutenant as well as for me, doesn't it?" anxiously asked Keene as the officer set out to find some dry sticks.

"I ain't playing no favorites," soothed Uncle Dick.

Gaining the hollow under the cliff, they lighted a torch and passed through into the cave-chamber. At the back of this were piled nearly two score skeletons. Relics of ancient firearms and the metal of accouterments littered the floor. But what held their eager attention were the fragments of buckskin bags and the handful of nuggets by each. The bags had rotted or been torn to pieces by animals, and, in some instances, the nuggets were found in little mounds, as if carefully piled. The three pursued their quest until they had collected them all and then Uncle Dick gave his opinion.

"Yellow Bear says they marched down this way in the spring. They must have wintered back in the country somewhere. While waiting to march they found these nuggets. They were never picked up in this cañon. It all proves that gold was discovered in

Colorado many years before 'fifty-eight. Nowhere near as much as I'd hoped."

"Six thousand dollars is my rough estimate, if they all run as clean as these I've examined," said the lieutenant. "Quite a distance from the million I was wishing her."

"Hurrah," softly cheered Keene.

"You'd rather she wouldn't have the million?" cried the lieutenant indignantly.

"Ever so much rather," was the fervid response.

"I see," drawled the lieutenant.

Lieutenant Camp and his men were about to bid good-by to Uncle Dick and his friends, when a band of Indians came galloping toward them. The Arapahoes displayed much excitement, for Satanta was in the lead. His warriors halted, and, raising both open palms, Satanta came riding up alone.

"My brothers the Arapahoes, and my white brothers, I come to warn you there are bad Indians near here," he began. "They hid behind rocks and fired on my young men. My men have been chasing Ute horse-thieves. We were on our way to Medicine-Lodge Creek to sign the great peace treaty when we were attacked. I told my young men to fall back and they did so. No blood was spilled, but my brothers should keep their eyes open."

Yellow Bear's cold visage lighted with admiration at Satanta's earnestness. Before Uncle Dick could find his tongue to upbraid the Kiowa for his effrontery, Yellow Bear gravely replied:

"We thank our brother of the Kiowas. Did his

young men say what tribe these bad Indians belonged to?"

"They believe they are Utes," replied Satanta, his gaze never flickering as he stared at Yellow Bear.

"It must be so," solemnly declared Yellow Bear, "for my young men were fired upon by bad Indians, just as the Kiowas were. It would be bad medicine for the plains tribes if they fought against each other. Let the Kiowas ride away with the Long Knives; then, if they are attacked again, the Long Knives can say they were not to blame."

Uncle Dick rapidly interpreted this to Lieutenant Camp, who suppressed a smile as he declared:

"The words of the Arapaho are good. The Kiowas shall ride with me and no bad Indians shall harm them. We will see them far on their road to Medicine-Lodge Creek, where their little father, Colonel Leavenworth, waits to give them presents." And, at his command, the troopers surrounded Satanta.

The chief bit his lips; then turned a face that expressed only gratitude toward the officer and gave a signal to his warriors. They cantered forward and fell in behind their chief and his guards. A curt command and Satanta, greatest of all Kiowa chiefs, now that Dohasan was dead, had commenced the journey which was to end only after he had duly signed the treaty by those waters where for so many years his people had held their annual sun-dance.

Keene rode ahead, his bearing dejected. Isobel, beside Uncle Dick, with the Quail riding behind, began to show signs of uneasiness. Finally she asked:

"Is he—Mr. Keene angry with me?"

"Lord, no, little woman!"

"Then why does he keep away from us?"

"Probably just his way."

"Then it's not a nice way. I want him to talk to me."

"Uh-huh? Meaning he is to talk to you?"

"He makes me laugh and forget sober things," she explained, turning her head aside.

"Keene wins!" muttered Uncle Dick, spurring ahead.

Reining in by the side of the disconsolate young man, he informed him:

"I know this trail better'n you do. I'll go ahead and blaze the way."

"Trail? It's a toll-road. A blind man could follow it," retorted Keene.

"You dad-burned young idiot. She's lifted the gate. Reckon it means you can pass through. But don't think for a second you won't pay plenty of toll before the whole journey's over. Can't you get it through your thick head that she wants you to talk to her?"

And through the dusk of the pass they rode, ever climbing up to where the top of the range was still light with day—an old mountain man following the road his hands had built, and youth, oblivious to the glory of the sunset.

THE END